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The transformation of the *saeculum* and its rhetoric in the construction and rejection of roman imperial power

Abstract: The Roman conception of the *saeculum* (“age” or “generation”) became charged with political significance from the Late Republic onward. The *saeculum* was linked with imperial authority during the reign of Augustus with his foundation of the *ludi saeculares* (“Saecular Games”). Augustus recalculated the *saeculum* and created a new chronology for his Games, which celebrated the *princeps*’ ability to lead Rome into a new era of peace and prosperity through divine favour and the establishment of his dynasty. Later emperors legitimised their political authority by utilising what I call “*saeculum* rhetoric” in official contexts across a range of media. By the end of the second century CE, Christian authors had started developing a new rhetoric that redefined the *saeculum* as “this present world”, in contrast with expectation of eternal life in a “world to come.” This survey reveals that in Roman conceptions of time, the *saeculum* was not used as a tool for formal periodisation or commemoration, nor can it be categorised using strict dichotomies (e.g. linear/cyclical time, progress/regress). The *saeculum* is best understood by observing its original ritual context, which emphasised above all the beginning of an emperor’s reign through competition with the past and promises for a bountiful future.

1 Introduction

During the Imperial period, Roman emperors could legitimise their authority by identifying their reigns as the beginning of a new age or *saeculum*, which was linked to the performance of a religious festival called the *ludi saeculares*, or Saecular Games. In its original sense, the Latin term *saeculum* was interpreted as a “generation” or “lifetime”; we find the word used in this sense in Roman

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comedy.¹ A more specific definition was developed in the Republic, which set the *saeculum* as a period of one hundred years, the longest span of a human life.² Later, the term came to indicate “the present generation or age”, or could be applied to a period of history (e.g., the “Golden Age”).³ With the performance of Augustus’s Saecular Games in 17 BCE, the *saeculum* was recalculated as a period of one hundred or one hundred and ten years (also associated with the limit of a human lifespan), which became the longest fixed interval in the Roman conception of time.

This investigation shows how the *saeculum* assumed greater significance through its association with the *ludi saeculares* during the Empire, as well as its reinterpretation in Christian contexts in Late Antiquity. There is a long history of scholarship on both the *ludi saeculares* and the *saeculum*, although no work has addressed their histories in full in relation to one another.⁴ Through the Saecular Games and the use of what I call “*saeculum* rhetoric,” an emperor advertised his role in establishing his dynasty, maintaining good relations with the gods, and ushering in an age of peace, a technique for legitimising political authority over time, not merely space.⁵ I give some key examples of this *saeculum* rhetoric from literary, numismatic, and epigraphic contexts.⁶ From the third century CE onward, another version of Christian *saeculum* rhetoric emerged that pitted the present *saeculum* of the world against a Christian conception of an after-life or eternity. As this analysis demonstrates, any discussion of Roman conceptions of time must take into account the political and religious motivations behind interpretations of the *saeculum* over many centuries.

1 Cf. Ter. *Eun.* 246; Plaut. *Mil.* 1079.

2 Censorinus *DN* 17.13 = F 38 Cornell et. al. 2013; Var. *L.L.* 6.11.

3 Cf. Cic. *Balb.* 15; Verg. *Ecl.* 4.5.

4 On the history of the *ludi saeculares*, see e.g. Nilsson 1920, Gagé 1934, Pighi 1965, Rantala 2017 (on the Severan Games); Dunning 2020 (on the Republican precursors to the Games); for editions and discussion of the inscriptions associated with these Games, see Pighi 1965, Moretti 1982–1984, Schnegg-Köhler 2002, Schnegg 2020; on coinage, see e.g. Scheid 1998, Sobocinski 2005 (on Domitian’s coinage); on the *saeculum* in Roman contexts, see e.g. Diehl 1934a–b, Haase/Rüpke 2006, Hall 1986, Dunning 2017, Hay 2017 and 2019; on the *saeculum* in Christian contexts, see Markus 1970 and Orbán 1970.

5 Hay (2017 and 2019) discusses the *saeculum* in the late Republic and early Empire in terms of what he calls “saecular discourse,” a very broad description of the process of periodisation of history influenced not only by the Etruscan *saeculum*, but also by Greek philosophy and mythology of the Golden Age. The choice of “saecular” to describe this discourse is somewhat misleading, as it covers the use of other Latin temporal terminology beyond *saeculum* (*aetas*, *aeuum*, *tempus*).

6 A fuller analysis of the several hundred examples of *saeculum* rhetoric in these media and their relationship to the *ludi saeculares* can be found in Dunning (forthcoming).

In the latter portion of this chapter, it is shown that the Roman *saeculum* does not fit tidily into recent discussions of linear/cyclical time, progress, or measurement and periodisation, nor has the influence of the *saeculum* been accounted for in previous investigations of legends and symbols for disseminating imperial authority.⁷ It is demonstrated that while the progression of Roman *saecula* cannot be described as fundamentally cyclical, neither was the *saeculum* linear: it lacked an identifiable end, unlike the Etruscan conception of *saecula*. In literature and historiography, imperial “*saeculum* rhetoric” did not result in any widely-recognised scheme of periodisation using the names of emperors, apart from the famous reign of Augustus that would be held up as an ideal and eventually associated with the return of a “Golden Age.” Imperial *saecula* were in origin commemorative and focussed on beginnings, on the promise of ages of security and affluence connected with the rise of dynasties. By necessity emperors ignored the endings of *saecula*, and competed with an Augustan past to promise a glorious future. The Christian conception of the *saeculum*, however, stood in opposition to imperial ideology, and emphasised the temporal quality of “this present age” by looking forward to its definitive end in the face of eternity.

2 The Republican roots of the *ludi saeculares*: the *ludi Tarentini*

The connection between the *ludi saeculares* and the *saeculum* in the Republic found in Censorinus and later authors is the result of their studies being conducted through the lens of Augustan reworking of history. In modern scholarship, it is rarely made clear that these early performances of the *ludi saeculares* were originally called *ludi Tarentini* and were not explicitly linked with the concept of a *saeculum*. This Republican predecessor of the Saecular Games was a rite attributed to the ancient Valerian clan that came to be celebrated in a civic context. The Valerii claimed a connection with the founder of rites offered at a region in the Campus Martius called the Tarentum, where the Saecular Games would later be held. This legendary ancestor, sometimes presented as the consul Valerius Publicola in 509 BCE, instituted sacrifices in return for divine aid in a time of illness or conflict.⁸ Romans had a religious obligation to preserve family rites, but by 249 BCE, during the First Punic War, the Tarentum cult had passed from gentilician to civic control (a very rare occurrence), and was then called the *ludi Tar-*

⁷ Cf. Noreña 2011.

⁸ Val. Max. 2.4.5; Verrius Flaccus in Festus, *Gloss. Lat.* 420; Plut. *Vit. Publ.* 21; Zos. 2.1–3.

entini.⁹ According to Varro, these Games were to be repeated one hundred years later, during the Third Punic War, but there is no evidence that this interval was called a *saeculum*.¹⁰ Discrepancies in chronologies for the *ludi Tarentini* are likely due to a Valerian desire to manipulate dates to connect these rites to famous ancestors. Thus, the Republican history of the *ludi saeculares* must be understood as the partially fabricated history of the *ludi Tarentini*, which only assumed a connection with the *saeculum* during the time of Augustus.¹¹

3 *Saeculum* rhetoric in the Republican and Augustan periods

The origins of imperial *saeculum* rhetoric can be traced to developments in the late Republic, which are examined in this section. The *saeculum* of the Roman imperial period derived its significance from two Republican sources: an Etruscan version of the *saeculum* linked to a human lifespan, and a fixed period of time that appears to have been set at one hundred years. By the late Republic, Romans had developed a habit of interpreting various portents as signs of the “end of the age.” While Augustus would adapt Republican conceptions of the *saeculum* by associating it with a series of Republican games and sacrifices that would form the inspiration for his *ludi saeculares*, these traditional rites were called *ludi Tarentini* during the Republic and were not originally linked with the *saeculum*.

3.1 Roman and Etruscan concepts of the *saeculum*

The Latin term *saeculum* originally meant “age” or “generation”, and was thus closely connected with the conception of the span of a human life, rather than having overtly political connotations. Our surviving evidence for the Republican understanding of the *saeculum* comes from references to Varro’s *De saeculis* in Censorinus. Varro distinguished between natural *saecula*, which varied in

⁹ Varro in Censorinus, *DN* 17.8.

¹⁰ Varro recounts that according to the Sibylline Books, the *ludi Tarentini* were to “occur every hundred years” (*utique ludi centesimo quoque anno fierent, ibid.*). Given Varro’s study of the *saeculum* discussed above, it would be strange for him to neglect to use the term if it held significance for the name or the celebration of these *ludi*.

¹¹ This is discussed in full in Dunning 2020.

length according to the longest-lived person in a generation, and civil *saecula*, which were calculated from a city's foundation. But Varro obscured this distinction in his discussion of the Etruscan *saeculum*, in which the first *saeculum* of a state or city began with its foundation and ended after the gods sent portents revealing the death of the eldest person born on its founding day. According to Varro, his Etruscan contemporaries claimed that their people had entered their eighth *saeculum*, and the *nomen Etruscum* would be destroyed in the tenth.¹²

The precise relationship between the Roman and Etruscan *saeculum* is unclear, but Varro also associated the passing of *saecula* with the Roman nation in a prophecy that the city would last twelve hundred years.¹³ In addition, L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, a Republican historian working in the second century BCE, referred to a chronological system of hundred-year *saecula* calculated from Rome's foundation.¹⁴ Thus, while Etruscan ideology assigned the *saeculum* a definitive end,¹⁵ a concept that would influence the Roman *saeculum* of the Late Republic, its linear chronology concluding with the extinction of a nation would cease to be emphasised after its connection with the *ludi saeculares*, as will be discussed below.¹⁶

In the final years of the Republic, Romans became fascinated by the idea of the “end of an age,” which was sometimes (but not always) identified with the term *saeculum*. Texts that described the political upheavals of the first century BCE connected the end of a Roman *saeculum* with Etruscan prophecy.¹⁷ Other sources enumerated signs of political change and turmoil without explicitly identifying them as omens indicating a *saeculum* shift.¹⁸ Luke and Hay have ar-

¹² Censorinus, *DN* 17.1–6.

¹³ *Ibid.* 17.15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 17.13; F 38 Cornell et. al. 2013.

¹⁵ Cf. Haase and Rüpke 2006.

¹⁶ For further discussion of Etruscan conceptions of the *saeculum*, see e.g. Briquel 1990, Guittard 2007, Santangelo 2013, 115–127.

¹⁷ Plutarch associated a change of generation (*γένος*) in 88 BCE with Sulla's rise to power: he recorded a tale that some Etruscans approached the Senate to interpret various portents as the sign that a new generation had begun (*Vit. Sull.* 7.2–4). A text referred to as the “Prophecy of Vegeia” warned that the eighth *saeculum* was coming to a close (*Gromatici ueteres* 1.350); while some have identified this passage as a translation of an Etruscan text into Latin from the Republic (cf. Huergon 1959, Guittard 2004), Adams makes a convincing case on linguistic grounds that it is a work from the Imperial period (Adams 2003, 179–182).

¹⁸ Cf. Cic. *Cat.* 3.9 for 63 BCE; my thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested that from Cicero's account of his words, Lentulus seems to have tried to manipulate Etruscan concepts of *saecula* for political purposes. Cf. Cass. Dio 41.14 for 49 BCE, which connects Pompey's arrival at Dyrrhachium with the eldest senator of a generation.

gued that Sulla was the first political figure to link his ascendancy with a new *saeculum* as a means to establish his power, but this view is controversial, and strong evidence in favour of it is lacking.¹⁹ Ultimately, the Late Republican appearance of “new age” portents and their connection with the political sphere provides the first hint of what I call *saeculum* rhetoric in the imperial period: the use of the specific term *saeculum* across various forms of media to legitimise one’s authority as founder of a new age (and often a new dynasty) characterised by stability and prosperity.

3.2 Creating the Augustan *ludi saeculares* of 17 BCE: a new chronology for the *saeculum*

The *saeculum* of the late Republic provided Octavian with a powerful tool for creating a narrative of his role in bringing peace and unity to Rome after civil war, and allowed the new *princeps* to establish a model for imperial *saeculum* rhetoric. References to a *saeculum* change appear again in Roman literature during Octavian’s ascendancy, but it is debatable to what extent Octavian had control over this *saeculum* rhetoric from the beginning.²⁰ As Augustus, he was the first to associate the rites at the Tarentum with the arrival of a new *saeculum* in 17 BCE: with the help of Ateius Capito, his advisor on legal and religious affairs, he was able to create a ritual sequence blending innovation and tradition.

Augustus and Ateius Capito’s decision to imbue the gentilician cult of the Valerii with the significance of the *saeculum* was likely influenced by the directions of the Sibylline Books (as interpreted by the college of *quindecimviri*) that prescribed the repetition of the *ludi Tarentini* after one hundred years; they were also able to take advantage of the abiding interest in *saeculum* change that characterised the Late Republic. The *princeps* may have been advised in these rites by important members of the Valerian clan who rose to prominent positions in this period.²¹ While several defining characteristics of the *ludi Tarentini* were retained

¹⁹ Cf. Luke 2014, 16–17, 44–56; Hay 2017 and 2019, 219–222. Weinstock (1971, 191–197) remains agnostic as to whether or not Caesar associated himself with a new *saeculum*.

²⁰ There is a similar debate about Octavian’s control over interpretations from an early date of *sidus Iulium*, the star or comet that appeared during the funeral games for Julius Caesar in 44 BCE: cf. Pandey 2013.

²¹ M. Valerius Corvinus was a staunch supporter of Augustus. M. Valerius Messalla Rufus, who sided with Caesar in the civil wars, wrote a treatise called *De familiis*, a study of old Roman *gentes*, that could have served as a reference for Augustus and Ateius Capito (Pliny, *HN* 35.8; cf. Cornell et. al. 2013, l. 385–389). Other Valerii also held influential positions under Augustus and

– sacrifices of black victims at the Tarentum over three nights, the performance of *ludi*, the supervision of the rites by the *quindecimviri* – the ritual sequence of the Augustan *ludi saeculares* included many new elements rooted in other Republican religious performances, such as the singing of the *Carmen Saeculare*.²² Sacrifices were also offered during the day on the Capitoline and Palatine hills to Jupiter, Juno, Apollo, and Diana.

These Augustan innovations to the *ludi saeculares* also entailed rewriting the traditional chronology of the Republican celebrations in the *Fasti* and in the *commentarii* of the *quindecimviri*. The dates of the Valerian tradition were difficult to reconcile with Augustus's desire to hold Saecular Games during his reign: the (probably legendary) celebrations of 509 and 348 BCE were associated with Valerian consuls, and the *ludi Tarentini* of 249 and 146/149 BCE were held roughly one hundred years apart. In order to create a tradition of regular celebrations, Augustus and Capito constructed a carefully calculated *saeculum* of one hundred and ten years that permitted a continuing association with the Valerii for their chronology of the first two celebrations of the Games in 456 and 346 BCE (when M. Valerius Maximus and M. Valerius Corvus were consuls) (cf. Table 1).

The Saecular Games of 17 BCE were very different in character from the expiatory performances offered at the Tarentum during the crisis of the First Punic War: they celebrated Augustus's success and establishment of peace at Rome after long civil wars, and promised that this security would endure for future generation under Augustus's heirs. The transfer of the former gentilician cult from the civic realm into the imperial sphere permitted the emperor and his family to play a central role in establishing good communications with the gods to ensure Rome's peace and prosperity. In fact, the old association between the rites and familial tradition was refashioned through their advertisement of Augustus's dynasty, since in 17 BCE Augustus had adopted the two sons of his heir Agrippa, and Agrippa officiated at the daytime sacrifices alongside the *princeps*.²³ The emphasis on birth in the new *saeculum* was not limited to the imperial family, but encompassed hope for a new generation of Romans:

served in the college of *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*: Messalla Rufus's sons M. Valerius Messalla (Rüpke 2005, 140–149, 1351) and Potitus Valerius Messalla (*ibid.* 138–156, 1352), and Corvinus's son M. Valerius Messalla Messallinus (*ibid.* 143–149, 1351). The Valerian connection with the *ludi saeculares* is discussed in full in Dunning (forthcoming).

²² Cf. expiatory hymns sung by choruses in procession: Livy 27.37, 31.12; Julius Obsequens, *Liber de prodigiis* 27a, 34, 36, 43, 46.

²³ Cass. Dio 54.18; Suet. *Aug.* 64. Cf. *Acta* of the *ludi saeculares* of 17 BCE = Schwegg-Köhler 2020, 28, 30, 32. It is also possible that Livia and Julia could have joined the 110 *matronae* in a *supplicatio*, but no female names survive in the *Acta* that describe the events.

through the deities who received worship (Juno, Diana, Ilithyia, Terra Mater), as well as the participation of *matronae* and children, the rites emphasised marriage, fertility, and childbearing. The combination of old and new elements in the ritual sequence and character of the *ludi saeculares* perfectly expressed Augustus's presentation of himself as the "renewer" of Republican religion. Augustus's success at adapting a Republican tradition can be measured by the choice of future emperors to respect the lengthy intervals between the games, rather than holding lesser "saecular" celebrations more frequently in order to enhance the glory of their own dynasties.

Table 1: Dating of early *ludi saeculares*, Pre- and Post-Augustan Chronologies

	1st ludi	2nd ludi	3rd ludi	4th ludi	5th ludi
Cassius Hemina (fl. second half of second cent. BCE) ^{a)}				146 BCE	
Calpurnius Piso (c. 180–120 BCE)				146 BCE	
Gnaeus Gellius (fl. 120–100 BCE)				146 BCE	
Valerius Antias (fl. c. 80–60 BCE)	509 BCE	348 BCE (<i>text is corrupt</i>)	249 BCE	149 BCE	
Varro (c. 116–27 BCE)			249 BCE	149 BCE	
<i>commentarii</i> of the <i>quindecimviri</i> (first cent. BCE)	456 BCE	346 BCE	236 BCE	126 BCE	17 BCE (<i>attested by many others</i>)

^{a)}Censorinus, *DN* 17.10–11 is the source for all authors and their dates for the Games, unless otherwise noted. Dates for Hemina, Piso, and Gellius follow Beck/Walter 2005 and for Antias, Rich 2005; all other author dates follow *Der Neue Pauly*.

3.3 Augustan *saeculum* rhetoric

The evidence for *saeculum* rhetoric from Augustus's lifetime demonstrates that while the term was originally defined as the newly established 110-year interval between celebrations of the *ludi saeculares*, it came to be connected with Augustus's religious authority and span of life. At first, this rhetoric was in the hands of

Augustan poets, rather than proceeding from imperial advertisements. As early as the late 40s BCE, Virgil had referred to a new *saeculum* displaying all the characteristic imagery of the Golden Age in *Ecl.* 4, but there is much debate concerning to whom it is dedicated; later at *Aen.* 6.792–794, Virgil explicitly names Augustus as the founder of *aurea saecula*, and similar rhetoric is found in Horace and Ovid.²⁴ Later in Augustus's reign, *saeculum* rhetoric began to be advertised in official contexts, such as an inscribed altar from Gallia Narbonensis (*CIL* 12.4333) and in the *Res Gestae* (*CIL* 3.774).²⁵ Nowhere in the surviving evidence do we find Augustus himself verbally identifying his life or reign with a new “Golden Age:” this language is lacking in his inscriptions and coin legends, and there is nothing in the ritual sequence of his *ludi saeculares* that would encourage such an identification (e.g., Saturn did not receive sacrifice, nor are such themes presented in Horace's *Carmen Saeculare*). Non-verbal representations of a new Augustan “Golden Age” are likely portrayed on the Ara Pacis and elsewhere, however.²⁶ Thus, imperial *saeculum* rhetoric does not necessarily equate with presentation of one's reign as a Golden Age, although much scholarship has been written on the subject.²⁷

Augustus's efforts to promote himself as the founder of a new age in 17 BCE took on a different character after his death, according to Suetonius, who recorded that various suggestions were made for accolades to his memory. An unnamed Roman proposed that the entire span of Augustus's life be called the *saeculum Augustum*, “Augustan age.”²⁸ This flattering proposition was an indication of the success of the *saeculum* rhetoric that Augustus had fostered and encouraged, but it also points to a major problem with all such imperial ideology: to what extent will his successors uphold the claims to power of a previous ruler?

²⁴ “Augustus Caesar, son of a god, who will found again a golden age in Latium amid fields once ruled by Saturn” (*Augustus Caesar, diui genus, aurea condet/saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arua/Saturno quondam*). Cf. Hor. *Carm.* 4.6.42 (13 BCE); *aurea saecula* in Ov. *Ars am.* 2.227 (2 CE) and *felicia saecula* in *Tr.* 1.2.103–105.

²⁵ That the Narbo inscription responded to and utilised Augustus's official rhetoric recalls Noréña's discussion of a similar phenomenon in the advertisement of imperial virtues (2011, 245–298).

²⁶ Cf. Holliday 1990.

²⁷ This includes the fragments of the cippus bearing the *Acta* of his *ludi saeculares* and the legends on his coinage issued in 17 BCE to commemorate the Games. In fact, the only overt references to an Augustan Golden Age appear to be in Virgil: Barker (1996) notes Horace appears to have taken issue with Virgil's portrayal of the *aurea saecula*, perhaps due to his deep misgivings about the nature of gold. On Augustus's reign as a Golden Age, cf. Williams 2003 and Feeney 2007.

²⁸ Suetonius, *Aug.* 100.3.

At the same time, the concept of an “age of Augustus” recalls the Etruscan version of the *saeculum*, in that it equates its duration with Augustus’s lifespan, but diverges from the original idea by focussing on the deeds of a single powerful individual, rather than on the lifespan of the longest-lived citizen in a generation. By pinpointing the start of the age to Augustus’s birth (rather than an anonymous person whose death was revealed by portents), it gave Augustus a form of authority over time that went beyond the *saeculum* rhetoric that the *princeps* had encouraged in his own lifetime, and indeed beyond that of all future emperors who would utilise this rhetoric for their own ends.

Thus, the Augustan adaption of Republican concepts of the *saeculum* for the *ludi saeculares* of 17 BCE established the first expressions of imperial *saeculum* rhetoric. While the *princeps*’ official advertisements of his “new age” were not at times as strongly stated or broadly dispersed as those of his successors, the ideology he fostered allowed for a “hybrid” *saeculum* that was a reinterpretation of the Roman and Etruscan models, with the beginning of an age associated with a founding figure who operated with divine blessing. If Augustus were indeed the first Roman to utilise time in this way, it would link him to many other examples of “agent-punctuated” temporal cycles that were “manipulated by a charismatic power”, as Lazar discusses in her study of the relationship between time and political authority across many periods and societies.²⁹ It is important to observe that at this time the *saeculum* was still closely connected to the celebrations of the Saecular Games, which were rooted in the topography of the city of Rome, and thus Augustan *saeculum* rhetoric (and that of his successors, Claudius and Domitian) was chiefly centred on the “Eternal City.”³⁰ Benoist describes this relationship between the “eternity” of the emperor and the city of Rome in rich detail in his monograph, demonstrating that the *ludi saeculares* were one of a number of ceremonies at emperors’ disposal that allowed them to link their authority and dynasties with *Roma Aeterna*.³¹

²⁹ Cf. Lazar 2019, 95.

³⁰ Chiefly, but not exclusively: a handful of examples appear outside of Rome, as with the Narbo inscription discussed above, or coins advertising the *ludi saeculares* of 17 BCE from Colonia Patricia, Hispania (*RIC* 1² 138–139).

³¹ Cf. Benoist 2005: on the *ludi saeculares*, see 237–208; on the relationship between the *aeternitas* of city and emperor, see 309–33.

4 *Saeculum* rhetoric in the reigns of Claudius, Domitian, and Antoninus Pius

Augustus's efforts to establish his authority through the connection of his reign with the *saeculum* created a model for future emperors to emulate through their performances of the Saecular Games. Yet the strength of *saeculum* rhetoric lay in the infrequency with which the Games were celebrated, and thus only a handful of emperors were able to fully capitalise on its potential. In this section, Claudius's recalculation of the length and starting point of the *saeculum* is discussed: it is shown that he made such modifications in order to hold the Games during his reign, thus establishing two competing series of *ludi saeculares* according to Augustan and Claudian chronologies. Not all agreed with Claudius's decision, and some writers started referring to the *saeculum* to critique not only the Claudian Games, but also his reign, thereby establishing a negative version of *saeculum* rhetoric for later generations. While Domitian's *ludi saeculares* adhered to the Augustan chronology and escaped censure, *saeculum* rhetoric was also used to criticise his reign.

4.1 *Saeculum* rhetoric and the *ludi saeculares* of Claudius (47 CE)

The second and third imperial celebrations of the Saecular Games were held in 47 CE under Claudius and in 88 CE under Domitian. Claudius revised the chronology of the Games to gain the opportunity to hold them during his reign, and constructed a scheme to reconcile Augustus's 110-year *saeculum* with 100-year *saecula* calculated from the foundation of Rome (cf. Table 2). As with Augustus's creation of the *ludi saeculares*, the new Claudian *saeculum* was rooted in Republican tradition, since 100-year *saecula* linked with Rome's duration were attested as early as the second century BCE in a fragment of Calpurnius Piso.³²

³² Censorinus *DN* 17.13 = F 38 Cornell et. al. 2013. Since the Claudian *ludi saeculares* established a model for commemorating Rome's foundation that would be followed by Antoninus Pius and Philip I, Benoist distinguishes between celebrations of *ludi saeculares* proper and what he calls *jubilés* (2005, 273–308); this distinction is useful as a reminder of certain possible differences in timing, ritual, and location between the Games of Augustus, Claudius Domitian, and Severus on the one hand, and the celebrations of Antoninus Pius (of which we know almost nothing) and Philip I on the other. Since all of these celebrations (apart from Antoninus's) are referred to as *ludi saeculares* in ancient sources, and since Claudius's jubilee-style Saecular Games seem to

Table 2: Dating of saecula/ludi Tarentini/ludi saeculares, Augustan and Claudian calculations

Republican <i>ludi Tarentini</i>	509 BCE (Valerius consul)	348 BCE (Valerius consul)	249 BCE	146/ 149 BCE				
Augustus: 110-year <i>saeculum</i>		456 BCE (Valerius consul)	346 BCE (Valerius consul)	236 BCE	126 BCE	17 BCE	(Games held)	
Claudius: 100-year <i>saeculum</i>	753 BCE (founda- tion of Rome)	653 BCE	553 BCE	453 BCE	353 BCE	253 BCE	153 BCE	53 BCE 47 CE (Games held)
Claudius: 110-year <i>saeculum</i>		504 BCE (Valerius consul)		394 BCE (Valerius consular tribune)	284 BCE	174 BCE	64 BCE	46 CE (Valerius consul)

The ritual sequence of Claudius's Games seems to have followed Augustus's model: Claudius emphasised his dynasty's connections with the new *saeculum* through the participation of his two heirs Nero and Britannicus, and, like Augustus, erected an *Acta* inscription in the Campus Martius. But Claudius competed with Augustus by linking his celebration with the neglected office of censor, which he assumed in 47/48 CE to expand Rome's *pomerium*.³³ His decision to revise the *saeculum* of the Saecular Games may be related not only to his censorship, but also his interest in Etruscan studies, since the Etruscan *saecula* began with a state's foundation. Claudian *saeculum* rhetoric appeared outside of Rome and in epigraphic contexts very soon after the Games were held, as may be seen in an inscription from Herculaneum, the *Senatus Consultum Hosidianum*, which records that it was composed *felicitati saeculi instantis*.³⁴ Ancient authors either mocked Claudius for holding the Games too early,³⁵ or they employed *saeculum*

have been ritually very similar to Augustus's (cf. *ibid.* 288–290), I have chosen to adhere to the original naming system.

³³ For a discussion of Claudius's extension of the *pomerium*, see Poe 1984.

³⁴ "... for the felicity of the approaching age" (CIL 10.1401). The inscription was set up in September 47 CE, three months after the Saecular Games were held.

³⁵ Plin. *HN* 7.159; Suet. *Claud.* 21.2 and *Vit.* 2.5; Zos. 2.4. Pliny and Suetonius put great emphasis on the formulaic proclamation of the Games that "no one had ever seen or would see again," recalling a line from the Augustan *Acta* (Schneegg-Köhler 2020, 20) and recalling the Etruscan reckoning of the *saeculum* with the age of the longest-lived person in that generation.

rhetoric in a negative fashion to criticise Claudius's policies and look forward to the age of the next emperor.³⁶

4.2 *Saeculum* rhetoric and Domitian's *ludi saeculares* (88 CE)

After the performance of Claudius's *ludi saeculares* in 47 CE, the position of the festival in Roman society and religious practice was less clearly defined: a new explanation of the significance of the rites, derived from the age of the city of Rome, had been set against the tradition established by Augustus. Domitian's celebration of the Games in 88 CE could not, therefore, be a simple matter of fulfilling expectation by following precedent. His decision to hold the Games aligned the performance with Augustan tradition, but placed them in a difficult situation: Domitian's *ludi saeculares* could either reduce the weightiness and importance of the Claudian *ludi saeculares*, or run the risk of losing their own significance by comparison with Games held within recent decades and living memory. Yet this latter scenario was not the end result of his celebration: ancient sources confirmed the legitimacy of Domitian's *ludi saeculares* over and against those of Claudius, despite the later memory sanctions issued against the unpopular emperor.³⁷ This approval was in part due to Domitian's close imitation of the Augustan model, heavily advertised in his massive coin issue of 88 CE: his emulation of Augustus is indicative of general Flavian tendencies to legitimise their dynasty, established after civil war, by claiming to restore the Republic and Augustan traditions of empire, particularly through the medium of coinage.³⁸ Domitian also strove to surpass Claudius by assuming the role of censor "in perpetuity" in 85 CE.³⁹ As in Augustus's day, poets supported the emperor's *ludi saeculares* through *saeculum* rhetoric, although they made a clearer connection between the arrival of the new age and the rites duly performed according to

36 Sen. *Apocol.* 1.1, 3. Seneca proclaimed that Claudius's *death* was "the beginning of a most happy age" (*initium saeculi felicissimi*).

37 The *Fasti Capitolini* recorded in Domitian's lifetime state that his *ludi saeculares* were the sixth in their series, when the Augustan *Fasti* had counted his celebration as the fifth, thereby completely ignoring the Games of 47 CE (*CIL* 1², p. 29). Zosimus describes Claudius's departure from the Augustan pattern in negative terms, while Domitian "maintained" or "guarded" (φωλάττειν) the traditional calculations (*Zos.* 2.4).

38 On Domitian's impressive series of coins to commemorate his *ludi saeculares*, see Sobocinski 2006; on Flavian "restoration" coins types, see e.g. Buttrey 1972, Komnick 2001, 165–171, 179–185, and Hurler 2016, 29–33. For a broader discussion of these subjects, see Boyle 2003, 41; Gunderson 2003; Rüpke 2012, 10; Dunning, forthcoming.

39 Cf. Jones 1973.

tradition at the Tarentum.⁴⁰ Due to the destruction of inscriptions connected with Domitian after his death, we are unable to tell if *saeculum* rhetoric was used in these official contexts as well as in his coinage.

Tacitus was partly responsible for ensuring that the memory of the *ludi saeculares* of 88 CE would be positive by denigrating the Claudian chronology and highlighting the careful attention to Domitian's Games, since he did not wish to undermine his own official role as a *quindecimvir* in seeing to their accuracy.⁴¹ But he and other Romans still used negative *saeculum* rhetoric to criticise Domitian's policies.⁴² Although Domitian's name was erased from the record of the *ludi saeculares* in the *Fasti Capitolini*, his Games themselves did not suffer official attempts to obliterate their memory: the praise of Domitian's *ludi saeculares* and criticism of Claudius's demonstrates that the commemoration of the Games could be preserved even when they were dissociated from the emperor.⁴³ Thus, the Saecular Games of the first century CE demonstrate that imperial authority over time was not unlimited: emperors who desired to connect their reigns with Rome's chronology would have to turn to *saeculum* rhetoric if they were not able to hold the Games according to the set schedule.

4.3 Antoninus Pius's *saeculum* rhetoric (148 CE)

The connection between the *saeculum* and the Saecular Games loosened from the second century CE to the Severan dynasty. Antoninus Pius may have celebrated Rome's nine hundredth birthday in the 140s CE following the pattern set by Claudius,⁴⁴ but his use of *saeculum* rhetoric in numismatic and epigraphic contexts never explicitly mentions the *ludi saeculares* or any other festival, and thus we may conclude that he did not hold the Saecular Games proper, perhaps to avoid Claudius's fate. Antoninus and his successors would use *saeculum* referen-

⁴⁰ Stat. *Silu.* 1.4.16–18; 4.1.17–21, 35–39; Mart. 4.1 and 10.63.

⁴¹ Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 11.11.

⁴² Tac. *Agri.* 3.1 and 44.5; Mart. 10.63.1–4; Plin. *Ep.* 10.2.

⁴³ Flower 2006, 242.

⁴⁴ Aur. Vic. *Caes.* 15.4. Geissen (2005, 168) observes that an Alexandrian coin issue may celebrate a new *saeculum* in 145 CE, when Marcus Aurelius and Faustina the Younger were married. Prior to Antoninus, Hadrian had issued an *aureus* between 119 and 122 CE that proclaimed a *saeculum aureum*, which is likely to be connected with his Parilia celebrations in 121 CE to celebrate the birthday of the city (cf. *RIC* 2.136; Poe 1984, 78–80). This was the first time that the phrase “Golden Age” appeared in imperial coinage or inscriptions. It is unclear as to whether any future rites were inspired by Hadrian's *saeculum* and Parilia rites.

ces in an increasingly formulaic style,⁴⁵ which provided the inspiration for Septimius Severus's use of the *saeculum* in coins and inscriptions at the beginning of his reign; the abundance of numismatic evidence from this period indicates that Severus had planned early on to celebrate the Games in 204 CE.⁴⁶

Thus, by the second century CE, *saeculum* rhetoric was seen as so desirable for legitimising a new reign or dynasty that Antoninus's successors began to divorce it from the *ludi saeculares*, no longer confining it to imperial coin or inscriptions created in years in which the Games were held. There is no surviving evidence that this *saeculum* rhetoric received criticism for being separated from the original Games in the way that Claudius's recalculations were disparaged by some writers, but more frequent use of the *saeculum* would eventually result in the weakening of the concept, as emperors in rapid succession boasted of the "new age" of their short-lived reigns.

5 The *saeculum* rhetoric of Septimius Severus, Philip I, and emperors of the third century CE

The *ludi saeculares* of Septimius Severus and Philip I (also known as "Philip the Arab") followed the Augustan and Claudian *saecula* respectively. Both emperors used their Saecular Games and *saeculum* rhetoric to showcase their families, their wives and sons, and connect the longevity of their dynasties with the promise of new ages. Philip was able to make special use of the timing of his Games, which celebrated Rome's millennium, and was the last of the *ludi saeculares* to be held: later emperors would attempt to capitalise on the significance of his *saeculum* to the point that they even reused coin legends that advertised Philip's Games, but these efforts only weakened the force of *saeculum* rhetoric in the late third century CE.

⁴⁵ E.g. coins such as *RIC* 3.309 (138–161 CE, obv. Antoninus, on rev. a personification of Felicitas and the legend FELIC SAEC COS IIII), *RIC* 3.709 (161–180 CE, obv. Faustina Minor, on rev. two infants seated on a throne with stars above their heads and the legend SAECVL FELICIT), *RIC* 4.56a (193 CE, obv. Clodius Albinus, rev. Felicitas with legend SAECVL FEL COS II S C); inscriptions such as *AE* 1993, 1787 (Mauretania Tingitana, 144 CE, refers to the "most august age," *augustissimo saeculo*) or *CIL* 2.5232 (Lusitania, 167 CE, refers to the deified Antoninus as "prince of all ages," *omnium saecu/lorum principi*).

⁴⁶ A typical example is *RIC* 4.664 from 194 CE, with the legend SAECVLO FRVGIFERO COS II and an image of the personified Saeculum Frugiferum.

5.1 *Saeculum* rhetoric and the *ludi saeculares* of Septimius Severus (204 CE)

Severus's Games, like those of Domitian, emulated Augustus's ritual sequence and retained all the key events of the earlier performances. The opening line of his *Acta* inscription stated that his Games were the seventh in the series established by Augustus, following upon the sixth Games, those of Domitian: Claudius's celebrations were ignored.⁴⁷ At the same time, Severus strove to outdo his predecessors: the *cippus* recording the events of his Games at the Tarentum loomed larger than its predecessors and provided far more ritual details. This inscription listed the names of far more of its participants, including women, children, and actors, thereby advertising the families who had risen to prominence in the new Severan age.⁴⁸ 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, Romans could situate themselves within a community headed by the imperial family who performed the Saecular Games on behalf of all Romans for the arrival of the Severan *saeculum*.⁴⁹ Severus continued to advertise his new age in official coinage and inscriptions across the Mediterranean on an unprecedented scale, firmly cementing the connection between time and the emperor in his subjects' consciousness.⁵⁰ As with the successors of Antoninus Pius, *saeculum* rhetoric continued to be appropriated by members of Severus's family in their coin issues.⁵¹

47 Severan *Acta* 1.1 (Pighi 1965, 140; Schnegg 2020, 288).

48 The surviving fragments include the names of *matronae* and Vestal Virgins who participated in the *sellisternia* and *supplicatio*, children who sang in the choruses for the *Carmen Saeculare*, and actors involved in the *ludi scaenici*, in addition to the names of the *quindecimviri*.

49 For the most recent discussion of the Severan *ludi saeculares* and their significance for the legitimisation of his dynasty, see Rantala 2017.

50 E.g. *RIC* 4.137 (203–208 CE, obv. Severus, rev. Caracalla and Geta sacrificing); *RIC* 4.263 (202–210 CE, obv. Septimius Severus, rev. Severus and his sons); *CIL* 3.75 and *CIL* 6.40623 (inscriptions from Philae, Egypt, 206 or 211 CE and Rome, 209–211 CE, bearing the formulaic opening “in the happiest age of our lords,” *felicissimo saeculo dominorum nostrorum*).

51 E.g. *RIC* 4.590 (211–217 CE, obv. Caracalla, rev. Felicitas and SAECVL FELICITAS S C) and *RIC* 4.2.145 (218–222 CE, obv. Elagabalus, rev. personification of Securitas with SECVRITAS SAECVLI).

5.2 Third-century *saeculum* rhetoric and Philip I's *ludi saeculares* (248 CE)

The last of the *ludi saeculares* were held under Philip I in 248 CE, following the Claudian series. Philip I chose to hold Saecular Games to celebrate Rome's millennium, and thus broke tradition with Antoninus Pius's decision to commemorate the new *saeculum* without connecting them to the Games. The surviving evidence is unclear as to how closely Philip integrated elements of Augustus's ritual sequence into his celebration, but he does appear to have emphasised newer rites, such as beast hunts, as attested in historical accounts and displayed on his coinage.⁵² As with the Severan coin issues, Philip's wife and young son feature prominently in his coinage to advertise his new dynasty.⁵³ Philip was not criticised for following Claudius's chronology: Körner observes that ancient sources for Philip's celebration attribute Games to Claudius and Antoninus Pius without referencing the Augustan sequence, indicating their lack of importance after the Severan Games became a distant memory.⁵⁴ Rome's millennium afforded too powerful an opportunity to overlook to capitalise on *saeculum* rhetoric, and as we have observed, emperors tended to compete with their predecessors in order to leave a more memorable mark upon the "new age" of their reigns.

After Philip, *saeculum* rhetoric in the chaotic third century CE was almost completely dissociated from the Saecular Games as emperors continuously advertised via coinage that their reigns would be sources of concord and stability for the empire. Their issues contained many novel formulas, such as "piety of the age" or "restorer of the age."⁵⁵ The use of certain legends has led some scholars to assume that some of these emperors (e. g., Gallienus or Carausius) held or intended to hold *ludi saeculares*, but these arguments are misinterpretations of reused coin types that looked back to Philip's Games as a form of *saeculum* rhetoric.⁵⁶ The Saecular Games of Severus and Philip had highlighted the importance

52 Cf. *Hist. Aug.: Gordiani Tres Iuli Capitolini* 33.1–3; Jerome, *Chron.* 2262–2263; the reference to Philip's Games in Eutropius 9.3 does not mention beast hunts.

53 E.g. *RIC* 4.3.225 (248 CE, obv. Philip II, rev. goat and low column inscribed COS II, and SAECVLARES AVGG // III.); *RIC* 4.3. (248 CE, obv. Otacilia, rev. hippopotamus and SAECVLARES AVGG // S C.)

54 Körner 2002, 251.

55 E.g. *RIC* 5.1.32 (260–269 CE, obv. posthumous portrait of Valerian II with legend PIETAS SAECVLI); *RIC* 5.1.52 (270–275 CE, obv. Aurelian, rev. RESTIT SAECVLI).

56 In support of Gallienus's Games: cf. Cerfaux/Tondriau 1957, 376 and De Blois 1976, 128, basing their arguments on coins such as *RIC* 5.1.273 (253–268 CE, obv. Gallienus, rev. an antelope or gazelle with SAECVLARES AVG); for Carausius, cf. Webb 1933 and Barker 2015, and coins such as *RIC* 5.2.391 (286–293 CE, obv. Carausius, rev. lion with SAECVLARES AVG).

of the city of Rome within the broader empire, associating the city's *aeternitas* with the emperors and their families and giving assurance that their dynasties would enjoy a similar longevity.⁵⁷ But these Games could not retain their significance if held too frequently, and since their performance was intimately linked with the city of Rome, the link between city and emperor was gradually broken, since many emperors in this period spent little or no time in that city. On the other hand, *saeculum* rhetoric could be divorced from its original ritual context to create accessible formulas that could be quickly distributed via coins; few emperors reigned long enough for inscriptions to be set up that utilised such formulas. The result of this process was the inevitable weakening of imperial *saeculum* rhetoric to vague promises of peace and security.

6 Christianity and *saeculum* rhetoric

By the end of the third century CE, Diocletian's establishment of a more stable regime allowed *saeculum* rhetoric to appear more frequently again in inscriptions alongside imperial coinage. From this point onward, the practice of using such rhetoric in formulas in epigraphic contexts across the Mediterranean far outpaced its use in coins, and continued to be used after the Christianisation of the empire. At the same time, Christian authors were developing an alternative meaning for the *saeculum* that recalled the negative rhetoric applied to Claudius and Domitian's reigns: in this usage, the *saeculum* stood for the transient world, in contrast with the permanence of a future age in the reign of Christ. These two forms of *saeculum* rhetoric coexisted throughout the centuries; even after the fall of Rome itself, Byzantine emperors continued to advertise themselves as rulers over "new ages."

6.1 Constantine and Christian imperial *saeculum* rhetoric

Both the Augustan and the Claudian series of the *ludi saeculares* ended after the ascendancy of Christianity at Rome. There is no record of Saecular Games being held in 314 or 348 CE, during the reigns of Constantine I and Constantius II, because of the adoption of Christianity as the official state religion and the gradual abandonment of Roman religious traditions. For Aurelius Victor and Zosimus, the failure of these Christian emperors to hold the Games led to disaster for

⁵⁷ Cf. Benoist 2005, 290–308.

the Roman state, leading to moral decline and the loss of territory and influence.⁵⁸ Yet Constantine's *saeculum* rhetoric portrayed a very different image of his reign, displaying his blessed status as a ruler granted divine sanction and protection in the establishment of a new "golden age:" the *aureum saeculum* appeared frequently in the poetry of his urban prefect, Optatianus Porfyrius. In the end, *saeculum* rhetoric thrived under Constantine, appearing in coins, inscriptions, and literature, and outliving recollections of its original connection with the Saecular Games.⁵⁹

Constantine had looked back to Augustus and Septimius Severus as models of imperial authority associated with new ages, and in doing so created a new archetype for his successors. Later emperors could model themselves on different styles of kingship, especially that of Constantine,⁶⁰ and *saeculum* rhetoric took on a new life in the Greek East as it became habitual for Byzantine emperors to present their reigns as the beginnings of new golden ages.⁶¹ *Saeculum* rhetoric appeared in imperial coinage until c. 367 CE, in epigraphic contexts until the fifth century, and in literature well into the sixth century.⁶²

By the sixth century, imperial *saeculum* rhetoric was fully divorced from its original associations with the *ludi saeculares*, and had to be adapted to bear the burden of history. Many ages and many emperors had come and gone, and a new ruler needed to establish his authority as an emperor participating in an ancient tradition of security and just leadership, while simultaneously outdoing all his forbears. As a result, the idea that an emperor *renewed* the glory of past ages, above all the ancient Golden Age, became ever more popular: in earlier centuries this description of the *saeculum* was very rare in official media, and appeared chiefly in literature that looked back to Virgil's *Ecl.* 4, which Christians in Late Antiquity often interpreted as a prophecy of the birth of Christ. This tendency to look backward, to take the past as the starting-point for an ideal reign, stands in stark contrast with a new form of *saeculum* rhetoric that arose in Christian

58 Aur. Vic. *Caes.* 28.2 (c. 360 CE); Zos. 2.7 (fifth or sixth century CE).

59 Cf. numerous coins such as RIC 7.185 (314–317 CE, obv. Constantine, rev. FELICITAS PERPETVA SAECVLI), the *Carmina* of Optatianus Porfyrius, and inscriptions from across the empire, e.g. CIL 8.2241 (307–340 CE, from Thignica, Africa Proconsularis, with the formula "in the most blessed age of our lords," *beatissimo saeculo ddd(ominorum) nnn(ostrorum)*).

60 Magdalino 1992, 8.

61 Whitby 1992, 86–87.

62 Cf. RIC 9.10 (with the legend GLORIA NOVI SAECVLI, perhaps issued in 367 CE to commemorate Gratian's reception of the title *Augustus*); CIL 6.1796d.96 (467–472 CE, Rome, "on behalf of the blessedness of the age," *pro beatitudine saeculi*), and such texts as Symm. *Ep.* 1.13 and *Or.* 3 (mid-fourth century CE) and Corippus *In laudem Iustini minoris* 3.76–82; 4.132–141 (566–568 CE).

contexts during the second century CE, which looked forward to an “age to come.”

6.2 The origins of Christian *saeculum* rhetoric in opposition to empire

Even as the emperors of the second and third centuries were developing *saeculum* rhetoric, a new Christian usage of *saeculum* was being developed that drew upon Hebrew and Greek antecedents, and which was in full flower by the time of the Latin apologists. In Latin renditions of Judeo-Christian scripture and liturgical texts, *saeculum* was often chosen as the equivalent of Hebrew *‘ōlām* and Greek term αἰών, which were frequently used in expressions of royal or divine power. The choice of *saeculum* in these contexts is significant: it might not seem to be the obvious candidate. Latin has a wealth of words for concepts of “time:” *aeuum*, *aetas*, *saeculum*, *tempus*. The word most closely related to αἰών is *aeuum*, ‘eternity; age, generation; time’, yet *saeculum* was chosen instead, almost certainly because of its pre-existing associations with imperial Roman power that were ultimately derived from the Saecular Games.⁶³

In Christian scripture, αἰών and *saeculum* could have a range of meanings, most commonly indicating “the present age, this world,” as at Matthew 38:20, where Jesus says, *et ecce, ego uobiscum sum omnibus diebus, usque ad consummationem saeculi*.⁶⁴ In 1 Timothy 1:17, a further range of meanings is demonstrated: *regi autem saeculorum immortalī, inuisibili, soli Deo honor et gloria in saecula saeculorum. amen*.⁶⁵ Christ is hailed as ruler of “the ages,” that is, of all past, present, and future ages in this world, but the doxological *saecula saeculorum* (from a Greek coinage based on Hebrew expressions) extends this power into a future world or eternity.

63 A fuller discussion of the relationship between *‘ōlām*, αἰών, and *saeculum* is found in Dunning (*forthcoming*). Nadjo (1990, 41–42) suggests that *saeculum* was chosen over *aeuum* due to the latter word’s association with poetic discourse; while it does appear often in poetry, *aeuum* occurs not infrequently in prose authors such as Pliny the Elder and Tacitus. In fact, αἰών has a poetic character in Judeo-Christian texts, where it regularly appears in doxological invocations, and thus *aeuum* as a translation might be thought to better capture the spirit of the original word.

64 καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος. (“And behold, I am with you always, until the ending of the world.”)

65 τῷ δὲ βασιλεῖ τῶν αἰώνων, ἀφθάρτῳ, ἀοράτῳ, μόνῳ θεῷ, τιμῇ καὶ δόξῃ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων: ἀμήν. “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory unto ages of ages. Amen.”

In response to imperial *saeculum* rhetoric, a new form of *saeculum* rhetoric that relied heavily on the scriptural use of αἰών was developed across communities of Latin-speaking Christians. The earliest surviving appearance of this rhetoric occurs in Latin apology of the second century CE and seems to have gone hand-in-hand with the first Latin translations of scripture. In pre-Vulgate Latin renditions of Greek texts, *saeculum* is often chosen to translate αἰών where the Vulgate gives *mundus*; we find examples of this usage in Tertullian and Cyprian.⁶⁶ Christian writers paired *saeculum* with the adjective *saecularis*, ‘worldly, temporal’. An adjective such as *mundialis* could just as easily have served to express the idea, and while such usage was not uncommon, *saecularis* carried political and religious connotations.⁶⁷ At all occurrences, the choice of *saeculum* either in a strictly Latin context or as a translation of a Greek word inevitably brings a passage into dialogue with imperial *saeculum* rhetoric. The link between the *saeculum* and the emperor’s claim to supreme authority over the known world advertised in the very public contexts of spectacles, coinage, and official inscribed texts would have proved offensive to early Christian groups, who assigned this power to their deity alone, so the use of *saeculum/saecularis* should be understood to carry a political weight, especially in early Christian polemic and martyrdom accounts.⁶⁸

6.3 *Saeculum* rhetoric in Christian apology

At the end of the second century CE, Christian writers like Tertullian had begun to utilise a new meaning of *saeculum* that contrasted the eternity of the afterlife with the present state of the world. Tertullian used the term frequently; in a typ-

⁶⁶ E.g. John 16:20: *saeculum enim gaudebit, uos uero lugebitis* (Tertullian, *Coron.* 13): “For the world will rejoice, but you will mourn;” or John 15:19: *Si de saeculo essetis, saeculum quod suum esset amaret: sed quia de saeculo non estis et ego elegi uos de saeculo, propterea odit uos saeculum* (Cyprian, *Ep.* 58.6): “If you were of the world, the world would love its own, but since you are not of the world and I chose you out of the world, the world hates you.”

⁶⁷ For example, *mundialis* was employed by Tertullian in *De spect.* 9, but he used it here in the sense of “belonging to nature/natural world.”

⁶⁸ Studies of the *saeculum* in Christian contexts include Harrison 2011, esp. 97–117, 126, 146–164 and Orbán 1970; but these are not situated in the context of the whole history of the *ludi saeculares* and imperial rhetoric. Nadjo (1990, 41–42) gives a hypothetical scheme of how the *saeculum* came to be interpreted as a “generation, world” by tracing its use in Republican literary contexts (from Plautus, *Truc.* 12–13, *Trin.* 283 to Catullus 14.23 and 43.8), but he does not give sufficient attention to the influence of imperial *saeculum* rhetoric or terminology in Judeo-Christian contexts.

ical example, his treatise on games and spectacles written between 197 and 202 CE, just prior to the Severan *ludi saeculares* in 204 CE, he portrayed the *saeculum* in a negative light, e. g.,: *utinam ne in saeculo quidem simul cum illis moraremur! sed tamen in saecularibus separamur, quia saeculum dei est, saecularia autem diaboli.*⁶⁹ For Tertullian, the *saeculum* no longer referred to a specific generation or period of time for an individual human or for the Roman empire, but it had come to encompass the entire present age of human existence. At the same time, Tertullian's rejection of spectacles and attribution of *saecularia* to the devil constituted an attack on Severus's display of imperial power: for the apologist, the emperor was not ushering in a new age and long-lived dynasty blessed by gods, but was offering empty promises of temporary security presided over by demons. Elsewhere, Tertullian used the *saeculum* to separate Christians from the power structures of Rome: *Non enim et nos milites sumus – eo quidem maioris disciplinae, quanto tanti imperatoris –; non et nos peregrinantes – in isto saeculo – sumus?*⁷⁰ Christians were foreigners in “this world” because they belonged to another realm in which they served as soldiers under a divine Emperor. This assertion need not be a complete rejection of the power of the Roman emperor, for it implies that Christians still had to live their daily lives in a strange country, *isto saeculo*, yet it destabilises imperial claims to universal authority over the ages, a theme that appears again and again in Tertullian.⁷¹ Other apologists (such as Cyprian) would continue to use the *saeculum* in similar fashion in their writings.⁷²

6.4 *Saeculum* rhetoric in martyrdom accounts and funerary inscriptions

Christian *saeculum* rhetoric was not confined to apologetic texts, but continued to be used in other genres and in funerary inscriptions in regions across the Mediterranean. This rhetoric appears to be an expression of identity that was widely shared among many Christian groups who had very distinctive traits derived

69 “Would that we did not even dwell in the world together with these wicked people! But nevertheless we are separated from them in worldly things, since the world is God's, but worldly things are the devil's.” (*De spect.* 15.8)

70 “For are not we, too, soldiers – indeed, subject to all the stricter discipline, that we are subject to so great an emperor? Are not we, too, in this world, foreigners?” (*De exhortatione castitatis* 12)

71 See e. g. *Adu. Marc.* 3.7 and *Apol.* 2.6.

72 Cf. Cyprian, *De dominica oratione* 19 and *Ep.* 58.1.

from their own local contexts and identities. Since “dying to the world” was essential to Christian conceptions of martyrdom, early *Acta* frequently employ *saeculum* rhetoric. For example, in the account of Perpetua’s martyrdom from around 204 CE, she wrote of herself and her fellow prisoners after a comforting dream that “we began to have no hope in the present age/world.”⁷³ Later, the narrator described a fellow prisoner named Secundulus who died in prison as being “called forth from the *saeculum*.”⁷⁴ In the *Vita Caecilii Cypriani*, the narrative described how Cyprian “spurned worldly ambition” and was “set straight from worldly error” by a friend who later entrusted him with his family “when he was departing from the world.”⁷⁵ In each of these cases, the range of meanings of *saeculum* and *saecularis* have been extended to more general forms of authority and privilege in the “present age,” not necessarily those directly proceeding from the imperial sphere; we find this usage also in Tertullian and Cyprian.

Yet the martyrs’ rejection of “this age” is at the same time a rejection to imperial claims to authority over the world. This is especially clear in the record of another early group of martyrs from North Africa, in which a Christian named Speratus tells the proconsul that he cannot swear by emperor’s genius because he does not recognise the *imperium huius seculi*, “the authority of this age.”⁷⁶ The repeated use of *saeculum* in such a condemnatory fashion would have had a jarring effect on a Latin-speaking audience that had been exposed to imperial advertisement of the “felicity of the age” or the “security of the age” in coinage and inscriptions for two centuries.

Funerary monuments for deceased Christians echo the language of martyrdom accounts not only by describing hope in an eternal life, but also by exhibiting numerous formulas that mention the faithful’s passage out of “this *saeculum*,” or describe the amount of time a person has lived “in this *saeculum*.” There are dozens of such inscriptions from across the empire that were created well into the sixth century. In a fourth-century CE example from Lusitania, it is said of a young woman who died in childbirth that she “withdrew from the

⁷³ *coepimus nullam iam spem in saeculo habere ...: Passio Perp.* 4.10 = Heffernan 2012, 107.

⁷⁴ *Secundulum uero Deus maturiore exitu de saeculo adhuc in carcere euocauit ...* (14.2 = *ibid.* 116) “But Secundulus God called from the world by an earlier end while he was still in prison ...”

⁷⁵ *ambitionem saeculi sperneret* (*V. Cypr.* 2.7 = Rebillard 2017, 206; second half of the third century CE); *a saeculari errore correxerat; ... de saeculo excedens ... commendaret illi coniugem ac liberos suos ...* (*ibid.* 4 = *ibid.* 221).

⁷⁶ *Speratus dixit: Ego imperium huius seculi non cognosco ... quia cognosco domnum meum, regem regum et imperatorem omnium gentium.* (*Passio Sanctorum Scilitanorum* 6 = Rebillard 2020, 96) “Speratus said: I do not recognise the authority of this age ... since I recognise my Lord, the king of kings and emperor of all nations.”

world (*recessit de saeculo*),” a formula found as early as 235 CE in other regions.⁷⁷ There are many variations on this formula from this and other provinces that express that idea that the deceased has passed away from the world: *migravit e saeculo*, *discessit a saeculo*, etc., which recall the phrases of martyrdom accounts described above.⁷⁸

Thus, the rhetoric of martyr acts and funerary texts expands our understanding of the Christian *saeculum*: eternity was always present to the individual who had departed from the “present age,” and did not function merely as a further historical period after the end of the world. In fact, the *saeculum* itself came to be used for a scriptural and liturgical expression for an infinity of ages: “unto ages of ages, *in saecula saeculorum*.”⁷⁹ In the context of epitaphs, the relationship with imperial *saeculum* rhetoric had become more distant: the funerary formulas were inspired by the same kind of Christian rhetoric found in literature that set the *saeculum* ruled by the Roman emperors against all time and eternity ruled by God. It is likely that the uses of *saeculum* in literary contexts operated in dialogue with the oral practices of Christian communities, influencing the way these groups thought and talked about how to die well. A martyr’s death was the Christian death *par excellence*, and thus it is not surprising that *saeculum* rhetoric associated with martyrdom accounts would be echoed on funerary monuments for the faithful who had died from other causes (and not in direct conflict with Rome’s Empire). Further study of the vast number of these texts is needed; we may conclude that *saeculum* rhetoric was not restricted to the literary sphere, but played a vital role in expressions of belief at different levels of Christian societies.

7 Interpreting the Roman *saeculum*

As this survey has demonstrated, the significance of the Roman imperial *saeculum* was bound up with religious ritual and the communication of imperial ideology; it was not used as a tool for historical analysis. It is difficult to define properly the Roman *saeculum* using modern categories, e.g., linear vs. cyclical time, progress vs. decline, Lazar’s primitivism vs. eschatology,⁸⁰ or theories of period-

⁷⁷ AE 2001, 1168.

⁷⁸ Cf. *CIL* 5.6738 (Vercelli/Vercellae, Transpadana), 5.8587 (Aquileia, Venetia and Histria); *ICUR* 1.473 (Rome).

⁷⁹ The expression is a translation of a Greek coinage based on Hebrew models; for a fuller discussion, see Dunning (forthcoming).

⁸⁰ Cf. Lazar 2019, 130–131.

isation. A more fruitful approach situates the *saeculum* in its original ritual context, in which the Saecular Games commemorated the arrival of a new age with a focus on present happiness, with a glance backwards to add the weight of tradition to the glory of the festivities, and hope for the preservation of Rome's blessed state in a vaguely-defined future period. Christian opposition to the imperial *saeculum* drew attention to the neglected "end of the age," which heralded the completion of the series of finite *saecula*.

7.1 Periodisation or commemoration?

Under the empire, ancient historians did not attempt to use the *saecula* established by Augustus and Claudian to indicate formal periods within Rome's history, although the *saeculum* could be used in other contexts to discuss the qualities of different periods.⁸¹ Thus, the *ludi saeculares* do not properly fit into discussions of ancient forms of periodisation such as the decline from a Golden Age, or an identification of historical periods with the human aging process.⁸² The *saeculum* was more closely connected with the religious performance that gave it its significance, and the earliest forms of imperial *saeculum* rhetoric were forms of commemoration of the *ludi saeculares* created in the same years as the celebrations: coin issues, and the *cippi* at the Tarentum. Domitian, Severus, and Philip took pains to imitate the coin types of their predecessors in order to underline the accuracy and legitimacy of their rites: they had kept the memory of the *ludi saeculares* intact and passed it on to a new generation. The very performance of the Games communicated the arrival of the new age to Roman people, providing them with the memory of spectacles that "no one would live to see twice." For the average Roman, it mattered little how the Games were numbered in their chronologies: the *saeculum* held its influence if the festivities were something grand and novel, and that power was diminished if there still lived a memory of previous Games, as was the case with Claudius's *ludi saeculares*. Above all, the Saecular Games were advertised as religious rituals that permitted Rome to continue to enjoy the gods' favour: their celebration and commemoration served as reminders of the emperors' ability to preserve divine goodwill and Roman piety.

When *saeculum* rhetoric was used outside the immediate context of the *ludi saeculares*, its power was dependent upon the extent to which it appeared con-

⁸¹ For alternative forms of Roman qualitative periodisation, cf. Hay 2017 and 2019.

⁸² Cf. Besserman 1996, 5–8; Le Goff 2014, ch. 1.

nected to a genuine “new age.” When the Antonines began to divorce *saeculum* rhetoric from the Games, they did so by looking back to the memory of Rome’s nine hundredth anniversary under the founder of their own dynasty, Antoninus Pius. Third-century emperors who reused coin types that proclaimed the Saecular Games of their predecessors likely did so as reassurance of their ability to maintain the stability and prosperity guaranteed with the arrival of the most recent *saeculum*. The weakest forms of *saeculum* rhetoric were those that had become merely formulaic in the coin legends and inscriptions of Late Antiquity: lacking rootedness in past rites, they offered only vague promises of future security.

7.2 Linear or cyclical time? Progress or decline?

Imperial *saecula* were not entirely linear. While the Etruscan *saecula* had succeeded one another in a strictly linear fashion, with the death of the longest-lived individual in a generation revealed by portents until the end of the *nomen Etruscum*, the “new age” of the Saecular Games was associated with the birth and renewal of Rome’s population at set intervals. No limit was ever placed on the number of imperial *saecula* in Rome’s history: on the rare occasions their duration was examined, it was understood that they would continue in perpetuity.⁸³

It is tempting to assume that Romans always interpreted the *saeculum* of the *ludi saeculares* as a form of cyclical time derived from the concept of a returning “Golden Age,” since at times they themselves used such language. For example, Horace in his *Carmen Saeculare* never called Augustus’s new age “golden,” but he wrote of prayers for bountiful crops and the return of moral habits of bygone days; he also referred to the *saeculum* as a “cycle (*orbis*).”⁸⁴ On such a basis, Benoist situates the *ludi saeculares* among rites belonging to cyclical time, which he describes as those rituals that were held either according to the agrarian calendar or according to “mythic time.”⁸⁵ The Republican precursors to the Saecular Games, the *ludi Tarentini*, could be viewed as participating in mythic time insofar as their foundation was connected with the legendary Valesius, but there was no

⁸³ Cf. the opening of the Severan *Acta*, which declare that the Games are to be held “for the security and eternity [of the empire] (*pro secu]rita[te] adque aeterni/[ate] [imperii]*) (cf. Pighi 1965, 140–175; Schegg 2020, 290–292 leaves a lacuna in place of *imperii*).”

⁸⁴ Cf. *Carm. saec.* 17–24; *Carm.* 4.6.42.

⁸⁵ Benoist 1999: on agrarian cyclical time: 130–133; on mythic time: 123–129; on the *ludi saeculares*: 173–192.

hint of an agricultural connection at this period. Augustus's indirect associations between his *ludi saeculares* and the Golden Age have a stronger connection to the cycles of the natural world, although human rather than agricultural fertility is emphasised, as discussed above. According to such a model, emperors presented the Saecular Games as initiating the beginning of a new cycle, a *saeculum aureum*, of general wellbeing for the state and its people after some period of distress and upheaval.

The problem with such an interpretation is that if the Golden Age needed to be renewed, the *saeculum* must have experienced a decline in quality through its own Silver, Bronze, and Iron periods. For this reason, it is essential to recognise that throughout the history of the Saecular Games, emperors who held the Games never verbally identified their individual *saeculum* as *aureum* in official contexts, but instead used imagery connected with the Golden Age (such as that of the Augustan *Ara Pacis*) to deliver such a desirable message of renewal more discretely.⁸⁶ We only see the phrase *saeculum aureum* in official contexts in a single coin legend of Hadrian, who did not hold the *ludi saeculares*, and in a handful of epigraphic formulas from Late Antiquity.⁸⁷ Emperors benefitted from direct references in literature to (re)foundings of golden ages; they seem to have actively encouraged the practice to a greater extent during and after the reign of Constantine.⁸⁸ Thus, the construction of the imperial renewal “Golden Age” was the result of interactions between imperial rhetoric (both text and image) and the creativity of ancient authors, a relationship described by Galinsky in his discussion of Augustan literature.⁸⁹

In fact, any attempt to define the *saeculum* as either “cyclical” or “linear” reveals the inherent instability in imperial attempts to legitimise authority via the medium of time. In order for the *saeculum* to be most effective at communicating an emperor's power, attention had to be focussed on the present: the arrival of a new age in his own day. The celebration of the *saeculum* would involve some effort to look backward at past periods of stability and forward with hope for a blessed future, but given that many emperors who celebrated the Games or used *saeculum* rhetoric did so after periods of civil upheaval, no mention was

86 Scholarship on Augustan art and the Golden Age is vast: see e.g. Zanker 1987; Galinsky 1996, 141–224.

87 Cf. *RIC* 2.136. The earliest inscriptions with *aureum saeculum* appear during the reigns of Valentinian and Valens in Numidia: cf. *CIL* 8.7015 (364–378 CE).

88 E.g. among the Julio-Claudians: Verg. *Aen.* 6.792–793; Ov. *Ars am.* 2.227; Sen. *Apocol.* 4; from Constantine onwards: Optatianus Porphyrius, *C.* 19.2–4; Symm. *Or.* 3; Corippus *In lauden Iustini minoris* 3.76–82.

89 Galinsky 1996, 225–287.

ever made of the eventual ends of their own ages, which would imply the end of their dynasties. Benoist offers a partial solution to this issue by discussing how emperors could peg the linear time of commemorations of events in their reigns and the lives of their families onto the cyclical time of the calendar and its rituals, yet the fact remains that no living emperor would want to identify an end to his *saeculum* and dynasty.⁹⁰ Horace may have already perceived the weakness in Augustus's efforts to promote his new *saeculum*: he observed that nature can cyclically repair itself, but human individuals (and their heirs) are confined to linear lives of birth and death, and cannot be replaced.⁹¹ Koselleck has written of the modern worldview that places emphasis on historical progress, observing that each "present" once existed in a past imagination as an idealised future.⁹² Imperial *saeculum* rhetoric offered hope for the future by assuring Rome of its present good fortune, but its imagined future was rooted in competition with successful models of the past, as emperors of later centuries demonstrated how closely they had emulated Augustus or Constantine. The "end of the age" is only found in the negative *saeculum* rhetoric of Seneca and Tacitus, or in its Christian variation that looked to the end of all human lives, and of all ages of the world.

8 Conclusion

The Roman conception of the *saeculum* underwent a radical transformation from the Republic to Empire through its association with the *ludi saeculares*. Augustus's redefinition of the term as a defined period of one hundred and ten years merged Etruscan and Roman traditions to demonstrate that his Saecular Games were a "one-in-a-lifetime" event, while his encouragement of *saeculum* rhetoric in official and literary contexts connected the *princeps*' life, and the duration of his dynasty, with a new age of peace and prosperity for Rome. Other emperors would take up and adapt this rhetoric for their own performances of the Saecular Games, with Domitian and Severus celebrating them according to the Augustan *saeculum*, and Philip I following Claudius's reversion to a *saeculum* of one hundred years. From the second century CE onward, *saeculum* rhetoric could be employed even in years when the *ludi saeculares* were not held, since it was such a useful tool for legitimising imperial power. So desirable

⁹⁰ Benoist 1999, 193–267.

⁹¹ Cf. Hor. *Carm.* 4.4.7.

⁹² Koselleck 1979.

was it to associate one's reign with a new age that imperial *saeculum* rhetoric survived into the Christian era, beginning in the reign of Constantine and continuing for several centuries, long after the Saecular Games ceased to be held.

From the second century CE, a new kind of *saeculum* rhetoric was developed among Christian groups in opposition to imperial expressions of authority over the Roman world and time itself; this understanding of the *saeculum* was initially derived from the translation of Hebrew and Greek scriptural terminology. The Roman emperors could proclaim their power to preside over prosperous new ages, but Christian apologists emphasised that the *saeculum*, the world itself, was ultimately in decline and would come to an end, after which the new age of Christ would begin. These writers sought to convey that imperial boasts of absolute power *in hoc saeculo* were meaningless when compared with eternal, divine authority over all ages. Such rhetoric was particularly suitable for early martyrdom accounts and funerary inscriptions, and it would continue to influence later Christian writers, particularly Augustine.⁹³ Thus, the Christian use of *saeculum* looked to the future and placed far more emphasis on the ends of human lives and empires, and of the world itself, than any imperial *saeculum* rhetoric.

The celebration of the Saecular Games, the creation of inscriptions, or the issue of commemorative coins could signal rebirth and renewal for the Roman world, but they were not entirely cyclical in nature: a *saeculum* came to a definitive close before another opened. Emperors could not risk embarrassment by drawing attention to the finite nature of their dynasties that they had so closely associated with *saecula*, and therefore focussed on the beginnings of ages. The Christian *saeculum* was by definition limited and destined for an end: only in the scriptural expression *saecula saeculorum* does the *saeculum* transcend the boundaries of time “in this world” and pass into eternity.

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⁹³ Cf. Aug. *De ciu. D.* 15.1; Markus 1970.

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