

## The Invention of the Ludi Saeculares of Emperor Honorius

Some surveys of Roman history, particularly encyclopaedias produced for the educated public, assert that the Christian emperor Honorius permitted the Ludi Saeculares (“Secular Games”) to be celebrated during his reign (cf. Stevenson 1889, Hands 1900, Bunson 1994). Pighi’s (1965) in-depth analysis of the Ludi Saeculares provides a citation for the only ancient source to directly associate Honorius with these Games: lines 388–391 of *Claudian’s Panegyricus de Sexto Consulato Honorii Augusti*. In this paper, I argue that this passage of Claudian’s poem serves only to remind Honorius of an ancient Roman festival, rather than to commemorate games that actually took place. No Ludi Saeculares were held in Honorius’s reign: the proliferation of modern testimonies to such Games proceeds, I conclude, from a sixteenth-century misinterpretation of Claudian’s poem.

I begin by examining all ancient evidence that has been cited to prove the existence of Honorius’s Games. This amounts to Claudian’s panegyric and a passage from Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* 1.379–407 (cited only by Taffin 1641). We lack any numismatic or epigraphic evidence that would confirm a celebration under Honorius (Hands 1900).

Next, I evaluate the two passages and dismiss Prudentius as a relevant source. In the lines in question, Prudentius does not refer to the Ludi Saeculares at all, but attacks the holding of gladiatorial *ludi*, which had been banned under Theodosius I. Claudian’s poem, however, which celebrates Honorius’s consulship of 404, does indeed refer to the Ludi Saeculares. The personification of Roma begs Honorius to come to Rome, saying: “*iam flauescencia centum / messibus aestiuae detondent Gargara falces, / spectatosque iterum nulli celebrantia ludos / circumflexa rapit centenus saecula consul*”. Honorius is the hundredth consul who “hurries on the ages that celebrate the games that no one has seen twice” (a traditional description of the

Ludi Saeculares: cf. Suetonius, *Claudius* 21.2), and if he will enter the city, Roma says, he will be the first emperor in a century to pass through the gates triumphant over enemies, rather than after victories in civil wars.

Claudian's passage does not point to a real celebration of the Ludi Saeculares. Dewar (1996) suggests that Claudian reminds Honorius that the year of his consulship fell one hundred years after Maximian prepared the Ludi Saeculares in 304, but he follows Nilsson (1920) in maintaining a reticence about whether or not the Games were performed. I argue that the religious context makes it extremely unlikely that Honorius could have celebrated Ludi Saeculares at any point during his reign. Constantine I had failed to perform the Games and severely curtailed traditional Roman religious practices. Theodosius I had reiterated Constantine's legislation, and Honorius showed no sign of breaking with his father's policy: during his reign, performance of *ludi* were banned in 404, and the Sibylline books (which were connected with the Ludi Saeculares) were burned in 407.

Finally, I examine the route by which Ludi Saeculares became attached to the reign of Honorius. Panvinio's (1558) first extensive study of the Ludi Saeculares states briefly that, according to Claudian, Honorius held the last of the Games. Taffin (1641) identifies the passage of Claudian and claims that Prudentius 1.379–407 attacks Honorius for allowing his "pagan" subjects to hold the Games, arguing that Honorius's "special edict" for the performance of the Games incurred divine wrath and led to the sack of Rome in 404. In this Taffin contradicts the "pagan" Zosimus, who claimed that the failure of emperors to maintain the tradition of the Ludi Saeculares led to Rome's decline. Later authors adopted this Renaissance invention (cf. Court de Gébelin 1776, Hands 1900, Müller 1938), but unless further ancient evidence is found, we must conclude that Honorius never celebrated the Ludi Saeculares.

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