

Spectators at the Saecular games

What do the games smell like?

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Figure 1: The smell of the approaching games. The flares produce light, suffocating smoke and strong smell. The mix, used for purification before the games in the Roman households, had similar properties. The coin above depicts one of the Roman officials offering this mix to the Romans on the eve of the festival.

All images of the coins are courtesy of the British Museum.

Introduction

Audiences of the ancient Rome experience theatre, races, athletic contests and gladiatorial combats nearly always during the religious festivals. The **Saecular games** were such a major ancient Roman festival, which combined sacrifices with shows, processions and ritual banquets. The Romans celebrated it once in a *saeculum* — hence the name — a period of 100 or 110 years. Emperor Augustus organised this festival in the summer of 17 BC.

The spectators of these games in their flesh and blood, their actual experience, its personal and cultural causes and consequences are my research field.

What it felt like to be there? What were the smells, the sounds and the lights of the festival? Who enjoyed and who tolerated it? How the city of Rome was transformed by rituals, processions and performances? Who administrated the festival?

Why study the audience of the Saecular games?

1. The Augustan edition of the **Saecular games** is exceptionally **well evidenced**.
2. The nature of any **performance**, even a contemporary one, is **ephemeral**. The study of the **audience's experience gives insights on** the matter of the **performance** itself.
3. **New methods and tools**, e.g. the sensory archaeology methods and the GIS mapping software become available only recently.
4. The Roman festivals are huge events with a **massive participation**, so studying audiences involves an analysis of the interactions in the communities and add to our knowledge of the **Roman society structure and functioning**.
5. Study of the locations of the festivals, the movement of participants through the city, the use of the newly constructed buildings lead to better understanding of the **urban planning** and the people's **experience of their city**.
6. This study is **interdisciplinary**. It bridges Theatre History and Classical studies.
7. Many **regimes** in the modern history, from the French revolution to contemporary authoritarian states **use Roman festivals legacy** when organising their own ones.

Where do we get the information from?

- A large inscription on stone, with decrees on the administration, timetable, topography of the festival and a summary of the prayers and the rituals.
- A hymn, performed at the games, written by Horace — *Carmen Saeculare*.
- A number of coins, struck by Augustan administration to commemorate the games.

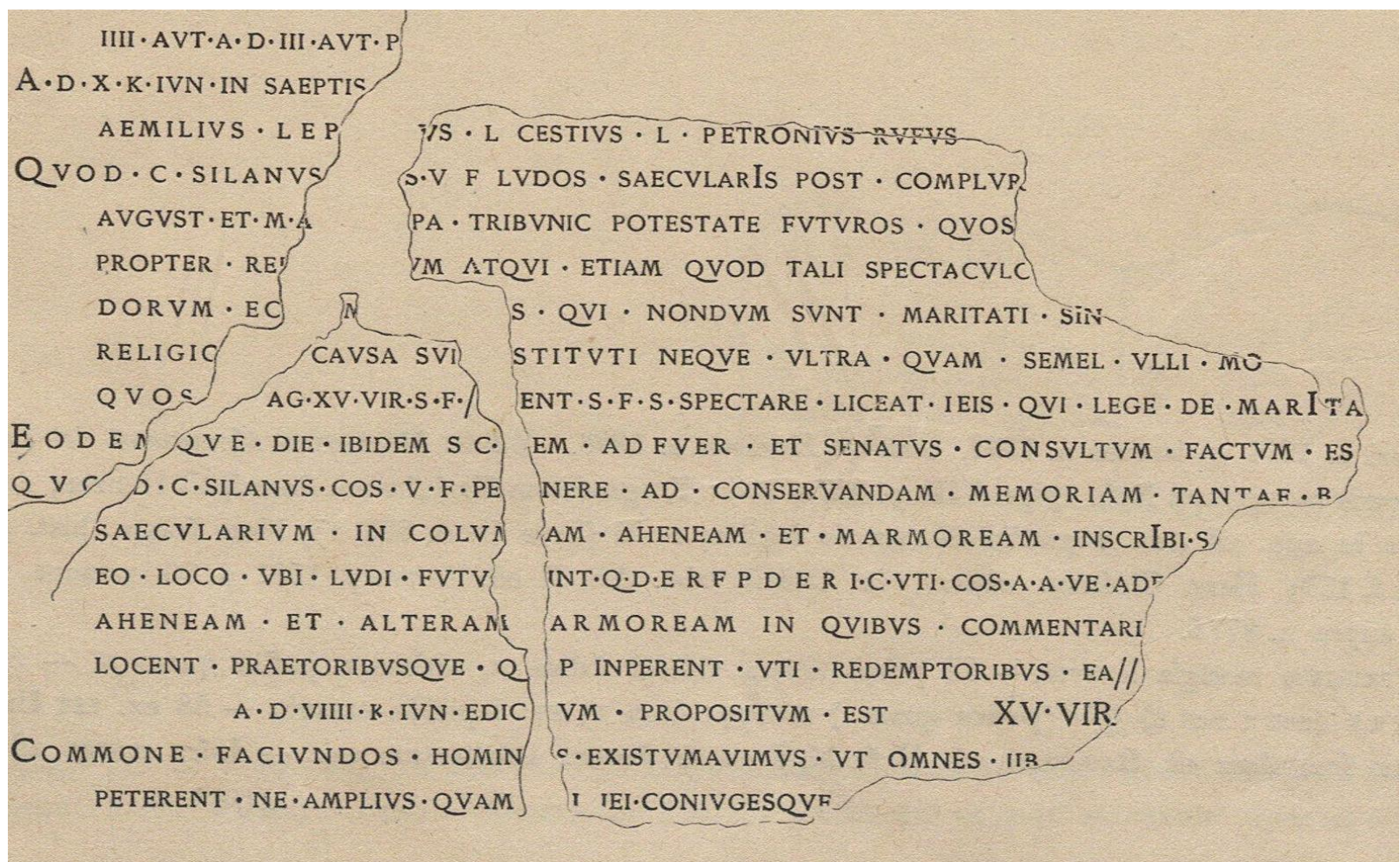


Figure 2: Left. Please scan to listen to the *Carmen saeculare*. Right. A fragment of the published inscription.

Complimentary evidence from latter editions of the games include:

- The account of 5th century's AD historian Zosimus [Hist.Nov. 2.1.1-10] on the rites and the traditions of Saecular Games.
- A similar inscription from the Septimius Severus' edition of the games in 204 AD.
- A significant number of coins struck for the Domitian's (88 AD) edition of the games.
- References in the texts of Roman historians, such as Suetonius and others.



Figure 3: An Augustan coin with a stella commemorating the games.

How we process information into knowledge?

Professor Y. Hamilakis, uses and theorises a methodology helping to engage with all the above described material. The archaeology of the senses aims at **detection of [these] diverse sensorial and affective possibilities, and their social meanings and political effects, as experienced by different people, different genders, different social groups.** [p.6, Y. Hamilakis, *The Archaeology and the senses*, 2014]

- An archaeology of the senses **does**
- explore the materiality of the past in its relationship with the sensorium
 - determine meanings and effects of the sensorial experience in the society
 - explore cultural and social factors which influence the sensory experience policies
- An archaeology of the senses **does not**
- aim to produce a coherent history of all the mankind's sensory experience
 - try to reconstruct any historical sensory experience, since the meaning of the sensorial experience is different in different cultures
 - privilege or exclude any particular sense or make a hierarchy of the senses

What the approaching festival felt like?

Three days before the games. The inhabitants of Rome **hear** the heralds calling everyone to the **spectacle, that they have never seen and will never see again.**

On the same day the **distribution of the substances for ritual purification** begins. Only the free Romans citizens are admitted, although the whole family is expected to attend — men, women and children. Initially, the officials assigned only one day for this, on a later meeting they added two more days. Each family is requested to come only once.



Figure 4: Red line marks the areas of the distribution. Basemap by Digital Augustan Rome.

The officials, which included Agrippa and Augustus, sit on a podium (see Fig.1) near important religious buildings: temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitol and a new temple of Apollo on the Palatine (see Fig. 4). The citizens climb the hill meeting their friends en route, and wait quite a long time to receive **sulphur, bitumen and torches**, which they take home with them and burn. These smelly components generate a lot of **dense and suffocating smoke**, but eventually could also produce a **lot of light**.

So, the experience of the approaching games meant anticipation of the "one in a lifetime opportunity" to be at the festival, huge crowds, affirmation of the citizen and family self-identification, direct interaction with the officials, private rituals, involving strong smells, bright lights and purificational properties.

The coin design (see Fig.1) depicts the distribution of the purificational substances. Using this coins later the participants could remember their eve of the games experience.