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 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 administered 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.

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.

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