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## **THE IDEA OF THE GOLDEN AGE AND *LUDI SAECULARES* IN ANCIENT ROME<sup>1</sup>**

My dissertation encompasses selected aspects in the history of Roman religion. The subject is divided into two parts, each of which could constitute an autonomous study of a particular issue. I deliberately employ the notion of “idea of the golden age” as opposed to myth, literary motif or allegory, because it is the former that interacts with the subject’s second component. The concept in question is not a Platonic insubstantial being; I perceive the idea of the golden age as a view or thought which became incarnated into the

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<sup>1</sup> Authorial appraisal of the doctoral dissertation written under supervision of Professor Leszek Mrozewicz, defended at the Faculty of History, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

universally understood, albeit variant shape of the myth<sup>2</sup>. In itself, the idea was subject to numerous fluctuations, which in turn depended on the context of the reign of the ruler who organized *ludi saeculares*. It was used in such sense as well in the political and religious context.

As regards the approach to the second part of the subject formulated as above, I considered Polish translations of the term *ludi saeculares*, such as *święta stulecia* (centennial holiday), *igrzyska sekularne* (secular games), *igrzyska wiekowe* (century games), *święta wiekowe* (century holiday), though none of those fully convey the richness of the Latin original. Much the same applies to translations in other languages, e.g. secular games, *Säkularspiele* or *Säkularfeier*, *Jeux Séculaires*, *Juegos Seculares*, *Giochi secolari*, and *эпохальные игры* in Russian. *Ludi* is the plural of *ludus* – a word denoting a game, joyful amusement, a plaything, a petty, trifling object, a joke, ridicule, frolicking, as well as place of exercise and school (e.g. *ludus magnus* – the great gladiatorial training school). Meanwhile, *ludi* in plural mean spectacular shows, games, holiday celebrations<sup>3</sup>. Some of them were held each year, for instance *ludi Florales*, others took place at more or less irregular intervals, as was the case with *ludi saeculares*, which were intended to take place after a *saeculum* had elapsed, i.e. only once during a lifetime. Translations of the term *saeculum*, be it *civile* or *naturale*, which Censorinus defined as *spatium vitae humanae longissimum partu et morte definitum* (Censorinus, DN 17.2) represent a similar problem in translation. The author of *De Die Natali Liber* noted a substantial discrepancy between the longest span of human life and the state's *saeculum*, i.e. the number of years between *ludi saeculares*. Rendering *saeculum* as century is unsatisfactory. In view of the above, I decided to opt for the original Latin designation of *ludi saeculares*, although throughout the dissertation I employ “igrzyska wiekowe” and less often “święta wiekowe” as a synonymous terms, still bearing in mind the limitations of such equivalents, which are neither faithful nor beautiful.

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The links and associations between the idea of the golden age and *ludi saeculares* had not been previously discussed in a comprehensive monograph. The claim hitherto considered the most justified stated that one of the secular

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<sup>2</sup> On the incarnation of idea into a universally understood shape of myth: W. Jaeger, *Paideia*, transl. by M. Plezia, 1, Warszawa 1962, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Entry *ludus* [in:] M. Plezia (ed.), *Słownik Łacińsko-Polski*, III, Warszawa 2007, p. 394.

games – those held by Augustus in 17 BC – were the inauguration of the golden age. The thesis tended to be iterated as a dogma, which should also be credited to Georg Wissowa, who suggested such a notion at a lecture delivered at the University of Marburg on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1894, on the 35<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary of Emperor Wilhelm II Hohenzollern<sup>4</sup>. However, it was only in Paul Zanker's „Augustus and the Power of Images”, a milestone book in the studies of the times of the first princes, that the thesis was widely propagated<sup>5</sup>. Zanker's conceptions, largely intuitive or otherwise insufficiently verbalized (at least in my opinion) met with a backlash of criticism, in particular his interpretations of *Carmen saeculare*, the song created by Horace on the occasion of *ludi saeculares* in 17 BC. In an article published in 1996, Duncan Barker attempted to demonstrate that Horace's work lacks references to the reign of Saturn/Kronos, allegedly returning during Augustus' golden age. The same applies to the inscription recounting the course of *ludi saeculares*, and the Sibylline prophecy. The author concluded that both *ludi* and *Carmen saeculare* failed to meet the expectations that Zanker wanted them to fulfil. He also added somewhat maliciously that the only gold in Zanker's book is the golden chest in which Sibylline prophecies were deposited<sup>6</sup>. It was from such doubts that the topic of my doctoral dissertation originated.

The association between the idea of the golden age and *ludi saeculares* was mentioned almost exclusively<sup>7</sup> with respect to the first imperial secular games, while ignoring the remaining celebrations which had taken place during the Republic (at least once – in 249 BC) and the Empire: under Claudius (47 CE), Domitian (88 CE), Antoninus Pius (147 CE), Septimius Severus (204 CE), and Philip the Arab (248 CE). One observes two distinct approaches to the issue: some researchers focus on the description of the golden age as a literary motif, while disregarding the context of times in which the author lived<sup>8</sup>;

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<sup>4</sup> G. Wissowa, Die Saecularfeier des Augustus. Rede zur Feier des Geburtstages Sr. Majestät des Kaisers und Königs am 27. Januar 1894 im Namen der Universität Marburg, Marburg 1894 (reprint: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, Whitefish 2010).

<sup>5</sup> P. Zanker, August i potęga obrazów, transl. by L. Olszewski, Poznań 1999, pp. 171-172.

<sup>6</sup> D. Barker, The Golden Age is Proclaimed? The Carmen Saeculare and the renaissance of the golden race, *The Classical Quarterly* 46, 1992, pp. 434-446, 435.

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of the doctoral dissertation by Jussi Rantali, *Maintaining Loyalty, Declaring Continuity, Legitimizing Power. Ludi saeculares of Septimius Severus as a Manifestation of the Golden Age* (courtesy of the author).

<sup>8</sup> E.g. K. Kubusch, *Aurea Saecula-mythos und Geschichte: Untersuchung eines Motivs in der antiken Literatur bis Ovid*, Frankfurt am Main 1986; J.-P. Brisson, *Rome et l'âge d'or de Catulle et Ovide. Vie et mort d'un mythe*, Paris 1992.

others are concerned with the description of *ludi saeculares* as such – often outside the context of contemporary reign.

The aim of my dissertation is *not* an antiquarian account of all the traces of the “golden age” in the literature of antique Rome, or a generic description of *ludi saeculares*. It aspires to fill, if only in part, the gap in historiography, and thus to achieve what numerous papers concerning the secular games failed to do. I was interested in the points where the idea and the games converged, as well as in those where the former concept was nowhere near the latter. I determinedly sought to resolve whether *ludi saeculares* constituted the inauguration of the golden age.

Analysis of the extensive literature and available sources, including protocols of secular games of Augustus and Septimius Severus enabled me to advance three research hypotheses. The sources on the Republican games – *ludi Tarentini* or *ludi saeculares* – are scarce; the significant observation, however, is that they contain no references to the golden age. If the *prodigia* for Rome were particularly inauspicious, Sibylline books were consulted, while the college of quindecemvirs decreed specific rites of expiation to be performed, which included *ludi saeculares*. Their aim was to obviate misfortune and restore *pax deorum*, not to celebrate the golden age. In the declining Republic, *ludi saeculares* should have taken place in 49 or 46 BC, but the state was torn by the civil war between Julius Cesar and Pompey. In such circumstances, the second thesis gains more prominence, namely the watershed nature of *ludi saeculares* of Augustus. The ruler was an adopted son of Julius Cesar, who vanquished Marc Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BC in the naval battle of Actium, and in 27 BC received the title of Augustus – which marked the beginning of the reign of the first Roman emperor. After eight years, Sibylline books were consulted, and a prophecy “discovered” therein stated that *ludi saeculares* were to be held in 17 BC. As the protocols of the games reveal, the preparations were made on a truly grand scale, and substantial effort was put into commemorating the games<sup>9</sup>. The fact that the celebrations were elucidated by the jurist Ateius Capito, while the fifteen men of the sacerdotal collage “fabricated” a suitable chronology and pronounced the games to be the fifth ones – all that was greatly significant. The holiday, founded on poorly known or almost entirely forgotten republican traditions, which I suspect owed much to the Etruscan entourage of the ruler<sup>10</sup>, became an opportunity to ce-

<sup>9</sup> Acta Aug. 61.

<sup>10</sup> See J. Hall, *The Saeculum Novum of Augustus and its Etruscan Antecedents*, ANRW II. 16.3, 1986, pp. 2564-2589.

lebrate a new Roman *saeculum* under the auspices of Augustus. Virgil foretold in *Aeneid*: “Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arva Saturno quondam”<sup>11</sup>.

*Ludi saeculares* were a manifestation of the golden age, which did not draw upon the return of Saturn’s generation, but sought to forge an ideal and harmonious “communitas”, the might of the motherhood and military power. Those three elements appear in the surviving protocols of *ludi saeculares* and in Horace’s *Carmen saeculare*. As I attempted to demonstrate, the golden age was not so much the golden time of Saturn, but a comeback of the old Roman virtues (“Iam Fides et Pax et Honos Pudorque. priscus et neglecta redire Virtus”<sup>12</sup>), health and prosperity of the Roman people, and above all, the birth of next generations. These hopes were expressed by the choirs of respectable matrons and 27 girls and 27 boys. The faith in future was also shared by Augustus himself, who in 17 BC adopted Gaius and Lucius, sons of Agrippa. As I demonstrated, similar elements of golden age ideology appear in the case of *ludi saeculares* of Domitian (88 CE) and Septimius Severus (204 CE). As regards the remaining games, the state of preservation of the source does not allow such unambiguous conclusions. The idea of the golden age was disseminated through manipulation in the symbolic domain. To use Pierre Bourdieu’s term – it was symbolic violence “which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity. (...) Violence is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such. It is based on a set of fundamental, pre-reflexive assumptions that people accept”<sup>13</sup>. As an example, one may quote the propagation of the so-called marital laws of *Lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus*, also during *ludi saeculares*.

The aforementioned theses are a result of analysis of diverse source accounts. These include epigraphic testimonies, i.e. two protocols of *ludi saeculares*, literary works – starting with Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, in which I looked for beginnings of the myth of the golden age, to works created in the context of secular games, as well as the accounts of antique historians. Unfortunately, some of the sources are known only in their excerpts (e.g. Varro preserved by Censorinus) or have not survived at all, as e.g. one of the books of Tacitus’ *Histories*, in which the author described *ludi saeculares* of Domitian. I also utilised numismatic artefacts minted on the occasion of *ludi saeculares*. The

<sup>11</sup> Verg., *Aen.* VI, 790-794.

<sup>12</sup> Hor. *Carm. saec.* 57-60.

<sup>13</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Przemoc symboliczna*, [in:] P. Bourdieu, L.J.D. Wacquant, *Zaproszenie do socjologii refleksyjnej*, transl. by A. Sawisz, Warszawa 2001, p. 162.

coinage is complementary to the remaining source accounts, while in the case of Domitian's coins, they compensate in a way for the unavailable protocol of the games, and make it possible to reconstruct the visual aspect of *ludi saeculares*. Another category of sources comprises representations which are customarily associated with the idea of the golden age, i.e. the Ara Pacis, the cuirass on Augustus' statue in Prima Porta or Tazza Farnese.

Chronological frame of the dissertation is determined by the dates of *ludi saeculares*. Besides the introduction, the work consists of three parts which correspond with the adopted analytical categories, and the conclusions chapter. Each part is preceded by its own brief foreword. The first part, entitled "The Time", was subdivided into three chapters:

- Time "dancing in place";
- The family time – the Republican *ludi saeculares*;
- The sacred time – the imperial *ludi saeculares*.

The first chapter, also divided into three parts, constitutes a preliminary to the deliberations regarding the temporal plane of Republican and imperial *ludi saeculares* (Chapters Two and Three). I discuss the views of grammarian Censorinus concerning time, which the author contained in *De die Natali Liber*, the treatise presented in 283 CE to Quintus Cerellius. I attempted to demonstrate that the text conveys notions of linear and cyclic time and the desire to rationalize history, including the striving to reject myths. Subsequently, I analysed the myth of the Sabine Valesius, who set out to save his sick children with the water from the altar of Dis Pater and Proserpina<sup>14</sup>. As it turned out, a part of the Campus Martius in Rome bore the same name; the children were delivered and the father, complying with the will of gods, was said to have made sacrifices of black animals to the aforementioned underworld gods on three consecutive nights. Then I discussed the time in Hesiod's account of the four or five ages of humanity, arriving at the conclusion that despite differences they are characterised by a cyclic nature. The essence of myth, and the nature of both *ludi saeculares* or *ludi Tarentini*, as they were called during the Roman Republic, lies in reiteration. Repetitions of *ludi saeculares* was to ensure continuity of the Empire and guarantee *pax deorum*. Zosimos, after all, would find that Constantine's failure to hold the games was the cause of the Empire's downfall<sup>15</sup>. In the two remaining chapters, I examine the chronology, which is either very uncertain in the case of

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<sup>14</sup> Val. Max. 2.4., Zos. 2.2.

<sup>15</sup> Zos. 2.7.2.

Republican *ludi saeculares*, or underwent manipulation in the case of imperial games. I consider the first imperial *ludi saeculares* to be a landmark event, as they established a canon on which later emperors drew. Domitian (88) and Septimius Severus (204) followed in the footsteps of August. In turn, Claudius' example, who combined *ludi saeculares* with the 800th anniversary of the foundation of Rome and changed their date to the 21 of April (previous were held in late May and early June), was emulated by Antoninus Pius (147) and Philip the Arab (248), who celebrated the 900<sup>th</sup> and 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city's foundation.

The second part of the dissertation, also consisting of three chapters, was entitled "The Space". This part is concerned with three types of spaces:

- "Envisioned spaces – literary evocations of the golden age in ancient Rome";
- "The concretized space – Tarentum";
- and "The ritual space – Rome during *ludi saeculares*".

A brief analysis of a poem by Arathos, its translation attributed to Germanicus Julius Cesar, as well as Carmen 64 by Catullus led to a conclusion that the passing of the golden age (otherwise than in Hesiod) is manifested by the departure of goddess called Dike/Virgo/Aratea or Iustitia, which was caused by neglecting to observe the customs of the forebears (*mos maiorum*): a failure to uphold their memory. In this respect, one should appreciate the contribution of Virgil who, in the "messianic" eclogue 4 prophesied the return of Virgo and the birth of a boy, while the *Aeneid* pointed to Augustus as the one with whom the golden age would commence. However, it should be noted that even Augustan poets allowed themselves mockery, as for instance Ovid who in his *Ars Amatoria* wrote that "this is the golden age, all worship gold; Honours are purchas'd, love and beauty sold"<sup>16</sup>.

In the subsequent part of the dissertation I conducted an analysis of a concretized space, the northern part of the Fields of Mars, called Tarentum, determining its topography and concluding that it by no means conformed to the image of the golden age. The next chapter, in which I describe the ritual space, or those places in Rome which witnessed *ludi saeculares*, revealed a number of elements which attested to the presence of the idea of the golden age, including an interdependence between the ritual, Horace's *Carmen saeculare* and the gable of the temple of Apollo on the Palatine Hill.

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<sup>16</sup> Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 2, 277-278.

The final part of the dissertation is devoted to the analysis of *ludi saeculares* in the context of power and memory. Participation of female deities and mothers in the centennial games proved to be a discovery of particular significance. As I demonstrated, these figures played a key role in the understanding of the links between the idea of the golden age and *ludi saeculares* in ancient Rome. All goddesses who received sacrifice were primarily associated with birth: the Moirai, as the “all-bearing”, were sacrificed nine lambs and nine goats, Eileithyia – the goddess responsible for delivery, a midwife and a protector of women in labour, was given 27 cakes, Juno Regina – the patron of married couples, received two white heifers, Mother Earth – a sow in pig, while Diana (whom Horace identified with Luna) – 27 cakes. The “mothers of the golden age” also played a significant role: they were *matres familiae*, who celebrated *sellisternia* to Juno and Diana, and on the 2 of June came to the Capitoline Hill to offer Diana a prayer. The protocol of *ludi saeculares* organised by Septimius Severus reveals that participating in the ritual were 109 matrons, the empress Julia Domna and two vestal virgins, even providing some of their names. The choir of 27 girls and 27 boys also played an important role, as they sang *Carmen saeculare* on the third day of celebrations at the Palatine Hill, but also *eodemque modo in Capitolio*. The song is a manifestation of the golden age under the auspices of the ruler. The last two chapters of my work are concerned with the description of symbolic violence which was brought to bear in connection with *ludi saeculares*. I attempted to demonstrate that the violence is present even in the prayer offered to deities. The ruler deliberately shaped the representation and notions of the golden age, as well as the envisioned community. His actions were not limited to celebrating secular games: they also forged the memory of the event, as exemplified by the tremendous columns with the protocols of *ludi saeculares*. In this part of the work, I also addressed the *damnatio memoriae* of Geta and Gaius Fulvius Plautian. The very final chapter was devoted to a short analysis of “the idea of the golden age without *ludi saeculares*”, while utilizing Carausius’s coinage to illustrate the notion.

It may be conjectured that an educated Roman was aware that the mythical Saturn would not suddenly appear in Rome, nor would there be a golden generation living on honey and acorns, knowing no hardship, pain or death. This is most likely what Censorinus conveys saying “itaque ut secula possim percurrere et hoc nostrum praesens designare, omissis aureis argenteisque et hoc genus poeticis, a conditu urbis Romae, patriae nostrae” DN 16.7. The findings of my analysis warranted the following conclusions: the golden age

promised and shown by the emperors was to consist in peace, respect for the law, health for the Roman people of Quirites, the college of the fifteen men, the emperor and his house; but most of all, it was to bring the birth of next generations. This is also why the secular games of Augustus broke new ground. *Ludi saeculares* held during the Empire were an emanation of the golden age. Consequently, Duncan Barker was in error, looking solely for palpable evidence of the golden age, the straightforward references which he failed to find in the protocols of the games or in Horace's *Carmen saeculare*. The foremost features of the golden age, which *ludi saeculares* sought to promulgate, were the return of virtues and the all-powerful might of the motherhood.