

Promoting Family, Creating Identity. Septimius Severus and Imperial Family in the Rituals of *Ludi Saeculares*

Jussi Rantala

Introduction

The last years of the second century CE witnessed a major change in Roman politics and society in a form of a civil war; as a result, power fell to Septimius Severus, commander of the Pannonian legions. This was the first time since CE 69, ‘the year of the four emperors’, when power was taken by means of war. The new ruler Lucius Septimius Severus, born in Lepcis Magna, a city in the province of Africa, in CE 145. He acted as a governor of Pannonia¹ when the Antonine era came to halt. After the reign of the last Antonine ruler Commodus (years 180-192) and the brief rule of Emperor Pertinax, power fell to Didius Julianus. However, three other contenders for the throne appeared: Severus in Pannonia, Clodius Albinus in Britain and Pescennius Niger in Syria, each commanding three legions. Severus and Albinus formed an alliance and Severus marched to the capital. Most of the troops there decided to support him and eventually the senate named Severus emperor while Didius Julianus was killed. This was, however, followed by a civil war against Niger, who was defeated in CE 194. Another war broke out soon between Severus and Albinus. The latter was defeated and killed in CE 197. After his victory, Severus returned to the capital to deal with his political enemies. According to sources, he had 64 Roman senators arrested for being too supportive towards Albinus, and it is claimed that 29 of them were executed.²

In order to strengthen and justify his power, Severus launched a massive campaign of propaganda. He was represented as a man who had brought peace and prosperity, and whose rule represented continuation of the Antonine dynasty after the short disruption of the civil war period. The most concrete part of Severan propaganda was his grandiose building policy in the capital. It appears that this was the most extensive project of constructing new public buildings, as well as repairing older ones, since the days of Augustus. These new and restored temples and other constructions carried Severus’ name and thus were an excellent way for the new emperor to advertise his position: they were a visible proof for the people of the capital about the prosperity and magnificence the new dynasty provided.³

¹ Pannonia was a Roman province located in modern-day western Hungary, eastern Austria, northern Croatia, north-west Serbia, Slovenia, western Slovakia and northern Bosnia-Herzegovina.

² For Severus’ rise to power, see Birley 1999: 81-128; war against Albinus: 121-128.

³ Cassius Dio as a contemporary historian was less than inspired when he mentioned (77.16.3) about the habit of Severus to add his own name even to the buildings which were not built, but simply repaired by him, ‘as if he had paid

The vast building projects were not, however, the only way to demonstrate the blessings of the Severan reign. Public celebrations, including sacrifices, animal- and gladiator shows, horse races and other kinds of entertainment, showcased the generosity of the emperor towards his subjects in an effective manner. Another remarkable event occurred in CE 204, when Severus celebrated an extremely rare religious festival, the *ludi saeculares*.

This article will focus on the roles of Septimius Severus and other imperial family members, Empress Julia Domna and two princes, Caracalla and Geta, in the ritual of the *ludi saeculares* (usually referred as ‘Secular Games’ in modern studies). This paper is based on an idea that ritual creates collective identity by means of representation. Furthermore, when different people or groups take a central role in the ritual they are often symbolically representing whole community (*communitas*). By acting as a symbol they create feelings of collective identity and loyalty. Moreover, a person (or a group) representing the community is usually seen as one possessing the ‘power to protect’, which means that her/his authority separates her/him from the audience; this authority is created and strengthened precisely in the rituals.⁴

From this viewpoint I evaluate the role of the imperial family members recorded in the inscription, commemorating and describing the rituals of Severan *ludi saeculares*. This monument was erected in Campus Martius after the rituals of the *ludi*; by its presence it preserved not only the games held by Severus in public memory, but also the messages Severus wanted to send through the festival. However, when we when we evaluate these messages, we should also consider who the primary audience of the games were. When we evaluate this, one important detail to bear in mind is that the feast was apparently celebrated only in the capital. There are no known examples of similar rituals in cities or towns other than Rome. The significance of the capital is further highlighted by the fact that in CE 204, heralds travelled through Italy to invite people to the city to see the games.⁵ However, considering the problem of legitimizing one’s power, there might have been more ‘specific’ groups among the audience to whom the rituals were aimed at; I will return to this problem in my article.

for the buildings from his own pocket’. The list of buildings built or repaired by Septimius Severus is presented in Benario 1958: 714-718. It should also be mentioned that in my article I use the Loeb edition when referring to Cassius Dio (and not the standard Boissevain system).

⁴ Koster 2003: 223-225.

⁵ Herod. 3.8.10. Apparently, heralds were used in earlier games as well, at least according to Suetonius (*Claud.* 21.2) and numismatic evidence (*RIC* 2 no. 596 (Domitian)).

Severan *Ludi*: Tradition and Innovation

To understand the importance of the *ludi saeculares* for Severus, their uniqueness should be kept in mind; the games were a religious phenomenon that was supposed to be celebrated only once in about a hundred years. For Romans, the games marked an occasion when an ‘age’ (*saeculum*) changed; it was a common belief that history consisted of different ages, and that passing of an age should be celebrated by *ludi saeculares*. This idea was discussed, for example, by a third-century CE grammarian Censorinus,⁶ who also provided the chronology of Roman Secular Games as it was understood during his time. His list of the games started from those of Valerius Publicola, which were, according to the author, held in 509 BCE – in other words, when the last Etruscan king Tarquinius Superbus was expelled from Rome. The second games were organized in 346 or 344 BCE, and the third occasion was in 249 or 236 BCE. For the fourth games Censorinus gave three possible dates: 149, 146 and 126 BCE.⁷

We know very little about the rituals of republican *ludi saeculares*, but some small pieces of information are provided by later authors. According to them, the games were organized by the priestly group of *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*, which was also the case for the *ludi* of the imperial period. In addition, we have reports of how the ritual was conducted in Tarentum (in Campus Martius) to honour Dis and Proserpina, two gods of the underworld. The sacrifice was made by an underground altar, which was unearthed for conducting the ceremonies. The victims offered to the gods were black; this was a standard procedure among the Romans when sacrificing to the chthonic gods.⁸

The first imperial games were organized by Augustus, who held *ludi saeculares* in 17 BCE, and, at the same time, apparently modified extensively the program of the festivals.⁹ The Augustan rituals began on the night of 31 May, taking place for three nights and days. The gods of the underworld, Dis and Proserpina, were nowhere to be seen anymore. Instead, a number of new gods and goddesses were given a prominent role: Moirae (Fates), Eileithyia and Terra Mater were honoured by a sacrifice in the nocturnal rites in Campus Martius.¹⁰ Daytime rituals were dedicated to Juppiter Optimus Maximus, Juno Regina, Apollo and Diana. In addition to the sacrifices, the festivals

⁶ Censorinus, *DN* 17.1-9.

⁷ Censorinus, *DN* 17.10-11. Moreover, the myth on which the games were based is recorded by two authors, Valerius Maximus (2.4.5) and Zosimos (2.1-4).

⁸ See, for example, Liv. *Per.* 49; Plut. *Publ.* 21; Zos. 2.4; August. *De civ. D.* 3.18.

⁹ Beard, North & Price 1999: 291-206. However, it appears that while giving the festival a new ‘imperial’ look, Augustus also preserved some elements from the earlier tradition. Poe 1984: 64-65.

¹⁰ It appears that these Greek deities did not have a cult in the Roman state religion before the *ludi saeculares*. Feeney 2003: 107-108.

included *sellisternium*¹¹ performed by 110 married women, and *Carmen Saeculare*, a poem performed by 27 boys and 27 girls.¹²

It seems that the other games of the imperial period followed the Augustan model quite closely, although Augustan *ludi* and the Severan games in 204 are the only occasions out of six *ludi* held during the imperial period of which we have a good deal of evidence left: an inscription containing the program of the festival, erected on the Campus Martius, survives from both festivals.¹³ Although only partly preserved, the Severan inscription describing the program of the *ludi saeculares* of 204 CE is the most complete report of any single Roman religious festival.¹⁴ The inscription was, as mentioned, erected after the festival in Campus Martius, one of the most important areas in the capital.¹⁵ In the same place stood the record of the Augustan games, from the year 17 BCE, and it is almost certain that other emperors who had organized Secular Games had erected their own inscriptions there as well, although basically nothing remains of games other than Augustan and Severan ones.¹⁶

The Severan inscription celebrated the festival and emperor's power both by means of tradition and innovation: the fact that the monument was erected next to the earlier records tied it to the tradition of earlier games. In addition, the main lines of the program remained more or less the same compared with Augustan source. On the other hand, the Severan inscription also included many new details compared to the records of the earlier emperors. To give just one example, the very active role of the Empress Julia Domna in the Severan games seems to be one of these novelties, as Livia, wife of Augustus who otherwise was a very powerful figure in Augustan propaganda, is

¹¹ *Sellisternium* was a ritual of purification, offered by women; apart from that, we know very little about it. However, it is likely that it resembled *lectisternium*, an expiatory ceremony including a banquet, during which the images of the gods sat on couches together with the participants – although it appears that during *sellisternium* the gods sat on chairs. *Lectisternium* was a ritual that traces back to the republican period; however, every ritual of *sellisternium* that we know of were celebrated in the imperial era. Price & Kearns 2003: 504.

¹² Augustan program is provided in Pighi 1965: 198-119. *Carmen Saeculare*, conducted by Horace, is preserved as well.

¹³ Imperial *ludi* were organized, after Augustus, by Claudius (in CE 47), Domitian (CE 88), Antoninus Pius (CE 147), Septimius Severus (CE 204) and Philip the Arab (CE 248). As one can notice, they were in practice organized once in about fifty years, although they should have been celebrated just once in about one hundred years. For the chronology of the imperial games, see Pighi 1965: 102-103.

¹⁴ Recorded in *CIL* 6 32326-32335 and Pighi 1965: 140-175.

¹⁵ The importance of the Campus Martius for the Romans is stressed by many writers, such as Livy (2.5), Plutarch (*Publ.* 8) and Dionysios of Halicarnassus (*Ant. Rom.* 5.13); they all record the story which connects the field with the birth of the republic. Well-known account comes also from Strabo who described Campus Martius as a magnificent site because of its temples, other buildings and natural surroundings (5.3.8).

¹⁶ There are just a few fragments remaining from the records of the Claudian *ludi saeculares*, but nothing else from other inscriptions. However, it is very likely that at least Domitian followed the Augustan example of erecting an inscription in Campus Martius, as he apparently followed the Augustan model extremely closely in all possible ways, suggested on the basis of the numismatic evidence celebrating the games of CE 88.

missing from the records of Augustan *ludi saeculares* altogether.¹⁷ These new details, however small they might appear, are very important when we try to evaluate which values and messages Severus wanted to bring forward in his festival.

Organizing the Games

The dynastic aspirations of Septimius Severus are evident already in the first lines of the inscription, as the source indicates the organizers: the emperor himself, his sons Caracalla and Geta and the Praetorian Prefect Plautianus.¹⁸ Inclusion of the last name is a noteworthy detail from this aspect, as Plautianus was tied in many ways to Severan family. Gaius Fulvius Plautianus was a native of North Africa as well and maternal cousin of the emperor. Apparently they had been close friends for a very long time and by the year 204 he had become a powerful figure in Rome: appointed prefect in CE 197, he also became a senator and a consul (in CE 203). Acting as a second-in-command for Severus, Plautianus' daughter Publia Fulvia Plautilla was married to Caracalla in the year 202.¹⁹

Generally, the first lines of the inscription lack direct references to imperial family roles; however, Empress Julia Domna's position as a 'mother of the camps', *mater castrorum*, is mentioned already in the first part of the inscription.²⁰ The title was given to Julia already in the year 195 in order to underline the connection between the Severan dynasty and the army. Close relationship with the legions was a necessity during that period in particular, as Severus was fighting constantly.²¹ However, question remains why it was this particular title that was used in the records of the *ludi saeculares*, as there were other options already available in CE 204: Julia Domna had received the title *mater caesaris* ('mother of Caesar') in the year 196, and in CE 198 she became *mater augusti et caesaris* ('mother of Augustus and Caesar').²² Later, her full title was *mater augusti/imperatoris et castrorum et senatus et patriae*, 'mother of the emperor, of the camps, and the senate and the fatherland'. After that, she was also known as 'mother of the Roman people' (*mater populi Romani*), although these two titles were given to her only in CE 211, when Septimius Severus died.²³

¹⁷ The empresses are also missing from the sources dealing with other *ludi*. For example, there are no traces of empress in the rich numismatic evidence celebrating the *ludi saeculares* organized by Domitian.

¹⁸ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* I 1-5.

¹⁹ Potter 2004: 116-120.

²⁰ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* III 9. She is also mentioned with this honorary title in IV 9, Va (V) 52 and (VII) 83.

²¹ Kettenhofen 1979: 79.

²² Kettenhofen 1979: 83-85; Levick 2007: 82.

²³ Levick 2007: 93. Julia Domna was the first Roman empress to actually take the title; see Kosmetatou 2002: 411-412.

One reason behind the selection of the title *mater castrorum* might be the fact that it was a title first given to Faustina the younger, wife of the last Antonine ruler Marcus Aurelius.²⁴ After all, the relationship with Aurelius and his dynasty was considered extremely important by Severus; his will to connect himself with the Antonine dynasty can be found in many of his actions and deeds.²⁵ As a result, it seems logical that Julia Domna was using a title connecting her to the Antonine tradition in a festival with major importance for the new dynasty and its propaganda.

Father of the *Communitas*

Moving on with the record, the actual rituals begun during the night between the 31 May and the 1 June, when Severus and his two sons gave an opening prayer. After that, Severus sacrificed to the Greek goddess Moirae nine female lambs and nine she-goats (all of them black, as was the custom when sacrificing to chthonic deities) and gave a prayer. According to the inscription, two senior Vestal Virgins, Numisia Maximilla and Terentia Flavola, were also present. As the source records, the Vestals were not actually praying with the emperor, but were simply witnessing the ritual.²⁶ The fact that two Vestals are mentioned in the inscription is an interesting detail, as this seems to be a Severan novelty; Augustan record does not mention Vestals at all, and there are no traces of them in the evidence considering *ludi saeculares* organized by other emperors either.²⁷

The inclusion of the Vestals in the inscription could be explained by their important role in Roman religious life, but perhaps even more by their significance for Roman identity. The role and function of Vestals in Roman cultic life and society was vast; generally, it can be argued that religious duties of Vestal Virgins were connected with purification and acting as guardians of the grain stocks of Rome.²⁸ However, especially their symbolic value for Rome was immense. There were no other priestly groups in the empire who were as much connected to the most important myths of Rome as were the Vestals; these myths included, of course, even the foundation story of the city (according to legend, Romulus and Remus were sons of a Vestal Virgin Rhea Silvia).²⁹ In addition, the priestly group of Vestals was thought to be founded by king Numa, a legendary figure who was considered to be the founder of Roman religion.³⁰ Their duties also highlighted their very Roman nature: the

²⁴ Keltanen 2002: 137-138.

²⁵ See Baharal 1996: 20-42.

²⁶ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* III 26-36. The first night also included theatrical spectacles and *sellisternium* by 110 matrons.

²⁷ The extensive numismatic evidence from the games of Domitian does not include any images of Vestal Virgins.

²⁸ Wildfang 2006: 6-33.

²⁹ Liv. 1.3.1; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.76.4; Plut. *Rom.* 3.2-3

³⁰ Liv. 1.20.3-4; Plut. *Num.* 1.20.3.

most sacred objects of Rome were kept in the temple of Vesta, and they also kept the eternal flame, symbolizing the stability of the state, burning in their temple.³¹

The judicial position of the Vestal Virgins was another important detail demonstrating their role as the symbols of Rome. When a girl was chosen to become a Vestal and given to the temple (at the age of six), she was no longer part of Roman citizenry, but became a unique legal entity. Because of this uniqueness, the Vestals could not identify with any other category in Rome, legally or ritually; as they were excluded from all other groups, they became a symbol of the whole society.³²

Taken this very special role of the Vestals into consideration, we may turn to the inscription depicting Vestals witnessing the opening rituals in Severan *ludi saeculares*. The formula of the actual prayer given by Severus at this point was very old. The same prayer was given already in the Augustan celebrations, but part of it traces even further.³³ The emperor first asked protection for the Roman people, but also for himself, his house, and his household (*mihi, domui, familiae*). This formula can be traced from the work of Cato the elder, who described a family prayer given in the ritual of *ambarvalia*, an ancient ritual where fields and city boundaries were purified.³⁴

It is noteworthy that Cato wrote about a private cult, led by the head of the household (*paterfamilias*). He was meant to make sure that traditional rites of the family were maintained and passed on to the next generation. Accordingly, it is interesting to note the similarities with the description of Cato about the private ceremonies where the whole household gathered to ask gods for the protection, and the prayer of the emperor in the *ludi saeculares*.³⁵ As in the traditional family ritual those who witnessed the prayer were the other members of the household, in the *ludi saeculares* of the year 204 the role of the family members was in fact reserved for the Vestal Virgins and other officials who witnessed the sacrifice.

As I would suggest, including Vestal Virgins could be seen as an attempt of Severus to highlight his position as a ‘father-figure’ of the whole community. We have already noticed how Vestals were the group most closely connected to Rome and Roman identity. By using Vestals as his ‘family members’ during the prayer where he asked protection not only for Roman commonwealth but also

³¹ The fire of Vesta: Ov. *Fast.* 6.297; Plut. *Num.* 11.1. For the symbolical value of eternal fire, see Staples 1998: 148-156.

³² Staples 1998: 143-156.

³³ For the prayer in Augustan *ludi saeculares*, see Rantala 2011: 248-249.

³⁴ Cato *Agr.* 141.

³⁵ Cato *Agr.* 141; cf. Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* III 53.

for himself and his household, Severus highlighted his position as *pater patriae*, father of the fatherland, and underlined his position between gods and the people – demonstrating that he, as a head of the family, was the one under whose protection Rome was.

First Lady of Rome

Even if there are traces of family roles given to the members of the imperial family in the first part of the inscription, it was during the second day when they became truly noticeable. The part of the inscription covering the second night of the rituals is very badly fragmented,³⁶ but the next part that covers the proceedings of the rituals of the second day presents lots of information about the importance of family roles in the Severan *ludi*.

The second day began with a sacrifice, a white cow, to Juno Regina. This was conducted by the emperor himself, with princes Caracalla and Geta, as well as the *quindecimviri*, also present. After that, a sacrifice was made to Juppiter Optimus Maximus by the emperor, after which he returned to the temple of Juno.³⁷ This was followed by a prayer by the emperor to Juno, with the Vestals and 110 matrons (including the empress) also present, as the inscription records:

‘Septimius Augustus, with the Vestal Virgins Numisia Maximilla and Terentia Flavola, imparted to Julia Augusta, mother of the camps and wife of the emperor, and to the hundred and nine matrons, who had been convoked....’³⁸

This passage represents Julia Domna and Septimius Severus as a married couple, as Julia is described as the *coniunx* of Severus. The word was used to describe a wife (or sometimes a husband) in relation to other partner – in fact, the verb *coniungere*, to which it is related, means ‘to join together’. In other words, it describes a couple joining in marriage.³⁹

However, perhaps the most striking detail in the records of the Severan *ludi* is the prominent position of the empress as a leader of the 110 matrons who performed in various phases of the ritual. The number of the women, 110, apparently referred to the length (in years) of *saeculum*, an

³⁶ Apparently the rituals included a sacrifice to Eileithyia, goddess of childbirth, and, following the example of the first night, theatrical spectacles and *sellisternium* by the matrons.

³⁷ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* IV 4-9.

³⁸ *Seuerus Aug. Iuliae Aug. matri castror. coniugi imp. et matronis CVIII, quibus denuntiantum erat, adstantibus Numisia Maximilla et Terentia Flavola uirg. Vest...*

³⁹ Treggiari 1991, 6.

age between the different celebrations of *ludi saeculares*.⁴⁰ The matrons appear in the inscription already during the first night-time rituals, holding a *sellisternium* to honour two goddesses, Juno and Diana. However, when the source records the proceedings of the second day, the matrons truly take the stage. The inclusion of matrons in the program is not a Severan novelty as such, as they appear already in the Augustan records in 17 BCE. However, in that document they are simply mentioned as participating in the ritual, described collectively as “110 matrons”. Compared to that, Severan inscription is a very different story. All the participating women are mentioned by their names, although just ten names are preserved more or less completely.⁴¹

It is, perhaps, relevant to shortly compare the details considering women in Augustan and Severan inscriptions. Why did Augustan source keep silence about the names of the matrons, who participated in the games of 17 BCE? Even Empress Livia is missing from the records, which seems strange, given the extreme importance of Secular Games for Augustan propaganda.⁴² One possible explanation is the Augustan idea about the collective guilt of Roman married women for the civil war of the last years of the republic. As modern scholars have noted, there are traces in the Augustan poetry of an attitude suggesting that because of the immoral behaviour of the Roman mothers, their children did not receive a proper upbringing; as a consequence, they became bad citizens and bad soldiers which eventually led to troubles.⁴³ Therefore it seems that women taking part in Augustan games were not ‘heroes’ as such, but their duty was to symbolize the group that was most to blame for civil war horrors. As a consequence, it appears that there was no need to record individual names in public memory.

Severan inscription is a very different story. The role of matrons as a part of the celebration was very well documented, and position of Empress Julia Domna as a leading mother is particularly emphasized. When we evaluate reason behind this presentation, it is important to remember that even if political situation between Augustus and Septimius Severus had some similarities, like a quite recent civil war, there is no trace of ‘collective sin,’ or a special guilt of Roman matrons, in Severan propaganda. Indeed, highlighting empress as a leader of ‘sinners’ would have been an odd thing to do from behalf of Septimius Severus, as his aim was to strengthen the position of his family as new leaders of the empire.

⁴⁰ The idea of *saeculum* as 110 years can be found in Censorinus, *DN* 17.1-9.

⁴¹ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* IV 12-Va 30. The cultural background of the 110 matrons would be an interesting question but, unfortunately impossible to thoroughly solve. The names that we know seem, however, to be provincial rather than Italian, as suggested by Birley (p. 160). The names are collected in Pighi 1965: 241-243.

⁴² For the *ludi saeculares* as a part of Augustan propaganda see Galinsky 1996: 100-106 and Zanker 1988: 167-172.

⁴³ Liebeschuetz 1979: 90-94; Wallace-Hardill 1982: 22-28.

Perhaps the answer can be found when we evaluate the actual names that the inscription provides us. Even if we know completely only a few of them, it is easy to notice that the names of the matrons represent the highest classes of Roman society: out of 109 matrons, 91 were wives of senators and 18 of knights (*equites*).⁴⁴ In other words, they represented the ruling families of the capital. Julia Domna was originally also a part of the elite, but not in Rome. Instead, she was a member of the very old Syrian nobility. As a result, in Rome she was probably a rather unknown figure before she became empress.⁴⁵

Taken this into consideration, highlighting Julia Domna as a leader of the senatorial mothers of Rome was probably a way to point out that she was indeed part of the upper class of the capital. In other words, she was represented as a part of a ‘network’ of noble women. Moreover, she was not just a part of them, but all the female members of the nobility of the capital were actually positioned under her rule. She was thus represented as the true, leading mother of Rome. It is also an interesting detail that one of the preserved names is Julia Soaemias – niece of the Empress Julia Domna. She appears to be leading the *equites*, as her name is mentioned first of that particular group. It is likely that her inclusion has a similar function with that of Julia Domna: to strengthen the position of another family-member of Severus as a part of Roman aristocracy.

The second day of the festival, as described in the inscription, is perhaps the most interesting part of the source from the viewpoint of ‘family roles’. The presentation of the emperor and the empress as a married couple; inclusion of all the names of Roman matrons taking part in the ceremonies; and the central role of Julia Domna as their leader, are, at least compared to Augustan inscription, all Severan novelties. In other words, these are details that Severus wanted to preserve in the collective memory.

Children for the Future

The final sacrifices took place during the third night and day of the festival: during the night, a pregnant sow was sacrificed to Terra Mater, goddess of cultivation. The prayer was given by Septimius Severus; Caracalla, Geta, praetorian prefect and the priestly group of *quindecimviri* were also present. Julia Domna and other Roman matrons followed the example of previous night time

⁴⁴ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* IV 12-Va 30.

⁴⁵ For Julia Domna’s background, see Levick 2007: 6-22.

rituals by conducting *sellisternium* in honour of Juno and Diana.⁴⁶ The following day was dedicated to Apollo and Diana. These two deities received a bloodless sacrifice (cakes) on the Palatine hill. This was the first occasion when the festival was held on Palatine; all the sacrifices of earlier nights and days were conducted on the Capitoline. The inscription records Severus, the two princes, the praetorian prefect and the *quindecimviri* advancing to the altar of Apollo on the Palatine and conducting the sacrifices; generally, the rituals followed the example of earlier days very closely. However, after the actual rituals a unique closing act was conducted, as 27 girls and 27 boys conducted a secular hymn, *Carmen Saeculare*, first on the Palatine and then on the Capitoline hill.⁴⁷

There are a couple of examples known in Roman history of using 27 youngsters in religious ceremonies, although usually these are connected with periods of crisis or bad omens.⁴⁸ The children taking part in the Severan *ludi saeculares* apparently came from the same social groups as the 110 matrons who took part in the rituals. In fact, it seems that some of the girls were the daughters of those matrons, and the boys were referred as 'senatorial' in the inscription, which means that the children were part of the highest social class of Rome.⁴⁹ We do not know the names of the children who took part in the *ludi* before the Severan games, as the Augustan inscription does not mention their names; however, in the Severan inscription the names of the youngsters were added, and almost half of them are known to us even if the inscription is partly fragmented from this part.⁵⁰

If we compare the two poems we know, it is noteworthy that Severan version differs considerably from the Augustan one. The latter we know very well, as it is preserved in the works of its composer, Horace. Augustan hymn reflects the rituals very closely, honouring the main deities of Augustan *ludi*, as well as Augustus himself. Severan *Carmen*, on the other hand, is not completely preserved; while Augustan inscription just mentioned that the hymn was sung in the celebration, Severan inscription actually includes the whole poem (unfortunately in a very fragmented condition). However, some basic observations can be made out of it. It includes an invocation to Apollo and Diana, but also references to shores and cities of the empire, as well as praise for

⁴⁶ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* Va 46-52. Theatrical shows were conducted during the third night as well.

⁴⁷ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* Va 60-71.

⁴⁸ See Liv. 27.37; 31.12.

⁴⁹ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* Va 84.

⁵⁰ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* Va 85-90. See also Pighi 1965: 243-245.

Bacchus and his golden fields. It also honours ships sailing in the seas, army and the camps, and finally a prayer that asks for protection to ‘our leaders’.⁵¹

One very interesting detail is the inclusion of the god Bacchus.⁵² There are no traces of Bacchus as a part of *ludi saeculares* before Severus, and, apart from the poem, he is not included in the rituals of Severan games either. However, even if Bacchus was absent from the official records, he possibly had a role in the event, as he appeared in Severan coinage celebrating Secular Games (in a *denarius* standing with Hercules).⁵³ Hercules does not appear in the preserved parts of the *Carmen*, but as he is presented in the numismatic evidence, it is very probable that he was included in the lost part of the poem.

These two gods, Bacchus and Hercules, had a major significance for Septimius Severus in his propaganda. For example, Cassius Dio writes about Severan building policy in the capital and describes how the emperor used a lot of money to repair old temples and to build new ones; of these, Dio mentions especially the temple of Hercules and Bacchus.⁵⁴ It is sometimes claimed that the attention given to these two gods points out to Severus’ African identity; for example, Anthony Birley argues that Bacchus and Hercules received an important position in the *ludi saeculares* of CE 204 because they were the guardian deities of Lepcis Magna, the home town of the emperor in Northern Africa.⁵⁵ However, the claim is somewhat problematic, as Septimius Severus is known to have been rather conservative regarding state religion, following ‘traditional’ models quite closely when dealing with the cults of the state.⁵⁶ Instead, the importance of Bacchus/Liber and Hercules in the games might lay in the fact that they were also the protectors of the princes, Caracalla and Geta. Indeed, already in AD 196 imperial propaganda had started to link Caracalla and Geta with Bacchus/Liber and Hercules.⁵⁷ Moreover, if we take a closer look at princes’ role in the Severan Secular Games, it should also be noted that the poem was dedicated to *nostrosque duces* (‘our leaders’). In other words, children who sung the *Carmen* did not only ask for protection for Septimius Severus, but for other rulers too. This indicates, of course, to other members of the dynasty who had a visible role in the games: Caracalla, Geta, and Empress Julia Domna.

⁵¹ As summarized in Birley 199: 159.

⁵² Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* Va 67.

⁵³ *RIC* 4.1 no. 257 (Septimius Severus)

⁵⁴ Cass. Dio 72.16.3. For Hercules and Bacchus/Liber in Severan propaganda, see Palmer 1978: 1094-1095.

⁵⁵ Birley 1999: 159.

⁵⁶ Fowden 2005: 556.

⁵⁷ Fears 1981: 114-115; Ghedini 1984: 70-72.

Taking the princes' role in the games into consideration, I would suggest that the deities symbolized the future of the dynasty and the continuation of the empire through the *Carmen Saeculare*. Performed by noble young boys and girls, the hymn was a remarkable symbol of the golden future of community. Highlighting the significance of youngsters for the new era of Rome, the ritual also puts the role of two young princes in to perspective. Even if Caracalla and Geta did not have a very independent role in the ceremonies, they are represented multiple times in the inscription. They are included among the main organizers of the festival,⁵⁸ they give permission and grant funding for the occasion (with their father),⁵⁹ and they take part in most sacrifices and prayers.⁶⁰ As the noble children sang praise for the new (Severan) age and, not only the emperor but also other 'leaders', it becomes clear that young princes are a crucial part of the hierarchy and, indeed, part of the family that leads Romans to the future.

Conclusion

The *ludi saeculares* of Septimius Severus were a magnificent display of power from behalf of the emperor. They can be considered as a culmination of his major building and repairing projects of the capital; indeed, one of the important targets of the program was to build an impressive platform for the games. The *ludi saeculares* were thus used to demonstrate the new grandiose look of the city, created by the emperor.⁶¹ However, other messages can also be found from the inscription.

If we look at the records of Severan *ludi saeculares*, Severus' role as a father of the community becomes evident: he bounds the destinies of the empire and of his family, and acts himself as *pater patriae*, father of the fatherland: *paterfamilias* of the community who provides peace and continuity. The concept of *pater patriae* was of course very common in the imperial Rome, and it is sometimes argued that the title itself was nothing more than a perfunctory honour from the first century onwards, part of the normal procedure of the senate recognition of a new emperor.⁶² However, the question is perhaps little more complicated than that, especially because it seems that the importance attached to family values changed in imperial policy from time to time. Considering Septimius Severus, his well-known interest in moral legislation and generally in promoting family values is evident in many sources, including contemporary historians and legal texts. Moreover, it is

⁵⁸ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* I 4.

⁵⁹ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* I 5-8.

⁶⁰ Pighi, *comm. lud. sept.* III 26-36; IV 4-9; Va 46-52; Va 52-57.

⁶¹ Gorrie 2004: 61-72.

⁶² Hammond 1959: 87-89.

a noteworthy detail that it was precisely during the reign of Septimius Severus when the soldiers were allowed to get married – an act which also highlighted the importance of family life.⁶³

All in all, it appears that as family values and other similar issues were emphasised, the idea of *pater patriae* became more significant during the Severan era. Accordingly, the inscription recording the programme of *ludi saeculares* seems to highlight this paternal role of the emperor. On the other hand, the actions of Julia Domna in the same record portrayed her as a leading mother of Rome, as well as a wife of the emperor. As a result, it could be argued that the monument encouraged people to evaluate their relationship with the emperor and the empress with family terms. Basically this meant that Roman commonwealth was portrayed as a metaphorical family, under the rule of the imperial married couple.⁶⁴ This idea was strengthened even more by inclusion of Vestal Virgins in the recorded programme: Vestals, probably the most important symbols of Rome, were displayed, not only under the influence of the emperor, but almost as a part of his ‘household’ during the prayers. The imperial identity, as Severus wanted to represent it, indeed had a strong family flavour; and by acting as the “parents” of the Romans, Severan couple raised above their audience, achieving an authority like no other in the community.⁶⁵

On the other hand, we must also bear in mind the quite limited audience of the celebration (basically the city of Rome and people who came to the capital to see the games), and of those who eventually saw the inscription in Campus Martius (and, indeed, who could read the text). This would indicate that one of the main goals of the emperor was to display his power precisely in the capital to the senatorial class and other traditional elite circles. After all, the relationship between Severus and the senate had been more or less troublesome, not least because of the purge Severus had made in CE 197 (as explained in the first Chapter).⁶⁶ By highlighting the importance of his family, Severus pointed out who was in charge of the empire to the senators and other people who could potentially question his power. Indeed, by underlining the roles of all the members of imperial family, and especially putting strong emphasis on women (with Empress Julia Domna as their leader) as a part of his Secular Games, Severus not only celebrated the new moral laws he had put through, but also reminded about the power hierarchy of the empire. After all, the main purpose

⁶³ Gorrie 2004: 62; Garnsey 1967: 58.

⁶⁴ Three types of ‘families’ can be found in Roman imperial propaganda: the actual imperial families, the families of the subjects and the metaphorical family, which is made by the emperor and his subjects (see Bryant 1999: 25-26). The Severan *ludi saeculares* appear to be a prime example of the last of the three.

⁶⁵ Imperial family motif can be found in other Roman ceremonies purposed to secure loyalty of the subjects as well; see, for example, in this volume the article of Gwyneth McIntyre which deals with imperial rituals focused on the army.

⁶⁶ The uneasy relationship between Severus and the senate is well attested by contemporary historians Cassius Dio (74.2.1-2) and Herodian (2.14.3-4.)

of these laws most likely was to control the senatorial class, keeping them alerted that they were constantly observed by imperial court.⁶⁷ This is probably one of the main reasons why Cassius Dio, a contemporary historian but also a senator himself, was quite sceptical and even ironical when he wrote about the Severan moral legislation in his history.⁶⁸

Moreover, we should also remember that audience always had an important part in rituals and celebrations. Both those who acted and those who just witnessed the occasion were considered to be part of the same community that celebrated and took part in the public spectacles together. In other words, audience and actors were part of the commonwealth that identified itself by means of public rituals.⁶⁹ As the senators were part of the audience, they at the same time (many of them perhaps unwillingly) showed loyalty to the reign simply by being present. To tie the senatorial class under his family dynasty was important for Severus, who had risen to the throne by means of civil war and from outside the traditional circles of Rome; Secular Games were one important toll for him to achieve this objective.

⁶⁷ Bryant 1999: 26.

⁶⁸ Cass. Dio 77.16. *Digesta*, a later collection of legal texts, recorded Severan interest in moral laws, and mentioned how he was especially strict when dealing with senatorial marriages (*Dig.* 48.5.2.6; 48.5.18.8).

⁶⁹ Östenberg 2003: 10.