Horace, *Carmen Saeculare* 1-75

**Name of the author:** Horace  
**Date:** 17 BCE  
**Place:** Rome  
**Language:** Latin  

**Category:** Roman  
**Literary genre:** Poetry  

**Title of work:** Carmen Saeculare  
**Reference:**  
1-75

**Commentary:**
The *Carmen Saeculare* ("Secular Hymn", or "Hymn of the Ages"; an ode by genre, which was literally sung) was commissioned by Augustus in 17 BCE in celebration of an ancient ceremony founded by the Valerian gens, and later adapted to a national observance entitled the *ludi Tarentini* in 249 BCE. The ceremony was all but forgotten after its celebration in 149 BCE, during the chaos of the civil wars, and was brought back by Augustus. Actually, his religious officials, counting from the beginning of the Republic, stated that the fifth *ludi Saeculare* was due to be celebrated in 17 BCE. Augustus's reform of the festival, celebrated over a three day period (1st-3rd June) worshipped Ilythiae, the goddesses of fertility or more precisely of childbirth, the Fates, and the Terra Mater, the goddess of the Earth, during the night (replacing Dis and Proserpina, who were previously celebrated), and Jupiter, Juno Regina, and Apollo and Diana by day As the court poet at the time, Horace was given the job of composing this hymn, which was sung by a chorus of boys and girls on the third day of the festival, to mark its closing. It was sung twice, once on the Palatine, and once on the Capitol, where Augustus and Agrippa had both made sacrifices during the festival. It is thought that this would have been the pinnacle of the poet’s career, as it made him the oracle of Augustus’s religious reforms (see Daniel Garrison, *Horace: Epodes and Odes*, p. 339). The piece takes the form of a hymn to Apollo and Diana, and is an essential literary testimony to the *pax Augusti*. As Hans-Christian Günther argues, the festival was an event by which the political regime was choosing to define itself, and Horace’s hymn was made all the more unique by the fact that until now, Rome did not have as much of a place for such public poetry, as did 5th century Athens, for example. More than simply accompanying the ritual events, the hymn acted as an interpretation of their significance (Hans-Christian Günther, “The Carmen Saeculare,” p. 432-433)

The hymn opens by asking Apollo and Diana to heed the prayers of the Roman people on the blessed occasion in honour of Rome’s gods, and asserts that there is nothing greater than Rome. The Sibylline verses referenced in verse 5 are the prophetic utterances written in Greek hexameter, and supposedly bought from the Sibyl by one of the Tarquin kings. As the story goes, these prophecies were destroyed in 83 BCE when the Capitol burned. Another replacement collection were gathered and edited by the *viri sacri faciundis* (the fifteen members of the *collegium* with priestly duties, responsible for guarding the Sibylline books) and placed in the Palatine Apollo, where they remained for consultation on matters of religious observance. The inscription made for the occasion informs us that twenty-seven boys and twenty-seven girls were taken from elite families where both parents were still living and married by *confarreatio* (the most sacred type of marriage), in order to sing the hymn to the gods (verse 6), who love the Seven Hills of Rome, one of the city’s most distinct and famous landmarks (verse 7). As Hans-Christian Günther explains, it is likely that the girls would have sang the first part of the poem, with its emphasis on Diana and female goddesses, and the boys the second part, which focuses on manly virtues and the *princeps* (Hans-Christian Günther, “The Carmen Saeculare,” p. 437).

The goddess of childbirth, Ilithia (also identified here with Diana, Lucina, and Genitalis), is invoked to protect Roman mothers and see the safe birth of their offspring. By naming numerous titles of the deity, the likelihood that she will hear and act upon the prayer is increased. Verses 17-18 refer specifically to the *Lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* and the *Lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis* (see http://www.cntelma.fr/lepor/notice432/?para=lex%20iulia%20de%20maritandis%20ordinibus%20&searchType=occ), both put in place by Augustus around the time that the hymn was composed (see Hans-Christian Günther, “The Carmen Saeculare,” p. 439). These were two of the least successful aspects of Augustus’s legislative reform, and while not *patrum decreta* (i.e. decreed by the Senate), the Comitia passed them with the Senate’s begrudging consent.
The marriage law (the former mentioned above) enacted penalties upon unmarried men, widowers who did not remarry, and couples who failed to produce children, while the adultery law (the latter mentioned above) ruled that adultery was a public crime, and offenders could be punished with banishment. One of the purposes of these laws, as verse 19 expresses, was that legitimate Roman matrons would produce enough legitimate Roman offspring, which was particularly necessary after the civil war. The *ludi Saeculares* were set at intervals of 110 years (verse 21), which was understood to be the theoretical limit of a human being’s lifespan. However, other authors, such as Livy, claim that the interval was in fact 100 years, and it was this timetable that the emperor Claudius was following when he celebrated the *ludi* in 47 CE.

Verses 25-36 implore the Fates to give Rome good fortune in the future, just as they have in the past, in the form of plentiful harvests and a productive earth. Apollo is beseeched specifically to listen to the boys’ prayers, and Diana, here taking on the role of Luna, the moon, is asked to listen to those of the girls. The hymn then asks that these gods give Rome’s offspring good morals as well as prosperity, and that the older generations might live peacefully (37-48). The anticipation of Rome’s future is set against its mythical past here, with reference to Aeneas’s flight from Troy and his eventual settling on Italian land (where Romulus would later found Rome), reminding that Rome’s people must be mindful of their ancestry and history, while endeavouring to create a more glorious future. The Trojan hero is referred to as *castus Aeneas* (verse 42), which is a variant of Virgil’s formula *pius Aeneas*, and recalls Aeneas’s transportation of the Trojan Penates out of burning Troy and into the new settlement in Italy; Rome’s future generations must uphold this piety.

It is asked that foreign enemies – Parthians, Indians, Scythians – will seek out peace with Rome, and virtues present in ancient times will return to the people of Rome under Augustus (49-60). The Scythians and Indians did in fact both send ambassadors to Rome (see Suetonius, *Augustus* 21.3). The presence of the personified virtues (57-60) is directly linked with the notion of a new golden age (yet the term “golden age” is not used in this text, which is quite surprising, see Richard F. Thomas, *Horace: Odes Book IV*, p. 79-80) under Augustus’s rule, as Hesiod (*Works and Days* 197-201) claims that the age of iron would see Aidos and Nemesis, the goddesses responsible for aiding mankind with the regulation of modesty and humility, would go back to their immortal home, abandoning humanity. The return of such virtues would signal the re-emergence of a golden age, and so the hymn’s anticipation of the return of Faith, Peace, Honesty, Modesty, and Plenty indicates that a new golden age is to be enjoyed under Augustus (57-60). As long as Apollo, aided by his sister Diana, who listens to the prayers of priests and children, looks down favourably upon his temple on the Palatine (dedicated by Augustus in 28 BCE), the Roman state (*res Romana*, as in verse 66, or *res publica*) will remain safe and prosperous (61-72). Although the hymn refers to the fifteen that made up the *viri sacris faciundis* who were responsible for guarding the Sibylline oracles and holding the *ludi* (verse 70), there were actually twenty-one priests at the time it was written, including Augustus and Agrippa.

With Augustus, the *ludi saeculares* took on a new character from that under the Republic – the emperor and his son-in-law and heir, Agrippa, were now the centre of the ceremony, the new temple of Apollo was integrated, and the gods honoured were new (the gods of the underworld were always praised, but the renewed ceremony saw the addition of the Capitoline Triad and Apollo; see Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome*, p. 200). These renewed *ludi saeculares* signalled a new age.

Keywords in the original language:

- Aeneas
- Alba
- Apollo
- augur
- Aventinus
- carmen
- Ceres
- corona
- Diana
- domus
- fatum
- fides
- gens
- honor
- Ilithyia
- Ilium
- Indi
- Jupiter
- Latium
- lex marita
- mater
- Medi
- Palatinus
- pater
- pax
- pudor
- regina
- res Romana
- Roma
- Romulus
- sanguis
- Scythae
- Troius
- urbs
- virgo
- virtus

Thematic keywords in English:

- Aeneas
- Alba
- Anchises
- Apollo
- Aventine
- Ceres
- children
- cornucopia
- destiny
- Diana
- faith
- fates
- freedom
- glory
- honor
- Ilithyia
- Indians
- Jupiter
- Latium
- marriage
- modesty
- Palatine
- peace
- plenty
- Roman law
- Rome (city)
- Romulus
- sacrifice
- Scythians
- senate
- Seven Hills of Rome
• Troy
• Venus
• virgin
• virtue
• wealth


Acknowledgements: Sylvie Franchet d’Espérey

Realized by: Kimberley Fowler

Source URL: http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/horace-carmen-saeculare-1-75