



VATICANVS GRAECVS 156, CASSIUS DIO AND THE *LVDI SAECVLARES* OF A.D. 204*

ABSTRACT

A scholium in codex Vaticanus graecus 156 provides evidence that Cassius Dio's Roman History once contained an explicit reference to the ludi saeculares of A.D. 204, something that has been denied in recent scholarship.

Keywords: Septimius Severus; Cassius Dio; Xiphilinus; *ludi saeculares*; scholia; Greek manuscripts

The *ludi saeculares* of A.D. 204 represented an important milestone in the reign of Septimius Severus.¹ Yet these games left little impression on the main historiographical (and biographical) traditions. Save one passage in Herodian,² there is nothing in the *Vita Severi*, nor, ostensibly, in the remains of Cassius Dio. Dio's silence has been viewed traditionally as a result of the imperfect textual transmission of the *Roman History*.³ However, traces of the event have been detected in Xiphilinus' *Epitome*. Xiphilinus' description at 77(76).1.4–5 of a seven-day spectacle featuring exotic animals emerging from a boat-like contraption accords well with visual evidence from the '*laetitia temporum*' series of coins, as well as with a fragment from the so-called *acta ludorum saecularium* describing the beast hunts which formed part of the *ludi honorarii*.⁴

Yet other explanations have been offered to account for Dio's apparent silence. For Rantala, the omission of the Severan *ludi saeculares* in the transmitted text of Dio was a deliberate choice by the senatorial historian himself.⁵ Rowan has suggested that Dio 'transplanted' his account of the games, merging it with his description of Severus' *decennalia* of 202 so as to 'underscore the extravagance of the emperor'.⁶ Scott has

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¹ These games have attracted considerable attention recently: C. Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices: Divine Ideology and the Visualisation of Imperial Power in the Severan Period* (Cambridge, 2012), 50–65; J. Rantala, *The Ludi Saeculares of Septimius Severus: The Ideologies of a New Roman Empire* (Milton, 2017); B. Schnegg, *Die Inschriften zu den Ludi saeculares: Acta ludorum saecularium* (Berlin, 2020).

² Hdn. 3.8.10.

³ E.g. F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford, 1964), 145; A.R. Birley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor* (London, 1999²), 160. Xiphilinus' narrative of the years from Severus' *decennalia* (A.D. 202) to the fall of Plautianus (A.D. 205) is particularly sparse (77[76].1.1–3.1).

⁴ C.W.A. Carlson, 'The "*laetitia temporum*" reverses of the Severan dynasty redated', *Journal of the Society for Ancient Numismatics* 1 (1969), 20–1. For this part of the games, see *Acta* lines 218–19 (Schnegg) = V^a 42–3 (Pighi), with Schnegg (n. 1), 386–7 and Rantala (n. 1), 103–6.

⁵ Rantala (n. 1), 11, 168, cf. 154.

⁶ Rowan (n. 1), 52. Rowan concedes that the position of Carlson (n. 4) is also 'a distinct possibility'.

taken this position further, and looked for a solution in Dio's compositional strategy, whereby Dio compressed the spectacles of several years into one narrative unit to illustrate the difference between the apparent stability of the Severan regime and its inner instability.⁷ Unfortunately, these recent positions are not tenable, for a crucial piece of evidence has been overlooked.

This evidence comes from codex Vaticanus gr. 156, a codex containing Zosimus' *New History*. In the upper margin of fol. 27v there is the following annotation alongside Zosimus' brief history of the games (Zos. 2.5):

ταύτην τὴν ἑορτὴν σεκουλάρια ὁ Δίων καλεῖσθαι φησὶ καὶ ἐπὶ ἑαυτοῦ γεγονέναι ὑπὸ τοῦ σευήρου συγγράφει⁸

Dio says that this festival is called 'secular' and writes that it occurred in his own time under Severus

The significance of this scholium has not been widely appreciated.⁹ What it establishes is that Dio's history once made explicit reference to the Severan *ludi saeculares*, treating them as a discrete named event. This adds considerable weight to the assertion that a trace of Dio's narrative of the games of 204 is preserved by Xiphilinus at 77(76).1.4–5. Yet Xiphilinus chose to omit Dio's specific identification of the games when he compiled his epitome.¹⁰ Furthermore, if Bandini and Forcina are correct in the identification of the glossator at 27v in Vaticanus gr. 156 with Xiphilinus himself, then Xiphilinus, although clearly interested in the games, chose to omit all references to the *ludi saeculares* in his *Epitome*, even the games of 17 B.C., which Dio records at 54.18.2.¹¹

Although this evidence invalidates the arguments of those who have looked to Dio to account for the silence, Scott's solution may be applied (*mutatis mutandis*) to Xiphilinus. Assuming that Dio's annalistic structure was maintained throughout the contemporary books, 77(76).1–2 appears to be a conflation of three successive years' worth of annalistic material, which was selected on account of its similarity of content.¹² At any rate, this 'fragment' from the margin of Vaticanus gr. 156, fol. 27v, should be added to a future edition of Dio's *Roman History*. If it also makes us think more about Xiphilinus, so much the better.

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⁷ A.G. Scott, 'Cassius Dio on Septimius Severus' *decennalia* and *ludi saeculares*', *Histos* 11 (2017), 154–61.

⁸ Here I follow the expanded transcription of Bandini (n. *), 696; cf. A.M. Forcina, *Lettori bizantini di Zosimo: le note marginali del cod. Vat. gr. 156* (Milan, 1987), 32. A copy of the codex Vaticanus gr. 156 is available at <https://digi.vatlib.it/>

⁹ For the marginalia in Vaticanus gr. 156, see Forcina (n. 8), 30–44, 70–9.

¹⁰ This seems preferable to Carlson's solution (n. 4), 21—namely, that a page was lost from Xiphilinus' epitome.

¹¹ Bandini (n. *), 696; Forcina (n. 8), 75.

¹² Cf. Xiphilinus' compression of Dio 54.16.3–19.3, a passage spanning the years 18, 17 and 16 B.C., which excerpts a series of anecdotes based around the idea of morality, omitting much and obliterating Dio's annalistic structure (93.26–94.11 D). For Xiphilinus' compositional technique, see M. Kruse, 'Xiphilinos' agency in the epitome of Cassius Dio', *GRBS* 61 (2021), 193–223.