The Dream of a German Renaissance: Conrad Celtis, Albrecht Dürer, and Apollo in Walter Pater's 'Duke Carl of Rosenmold' (1887)

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THE DREAM OF A GERMAN RENAISSANCE:

Conrad Celtis, Albrecht Dürer, and Apollo in Walter Pater’s “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” (1887)

By Lene Østermark-Johansen

A reference to the German humanist Conrad Celtis’s Ars Versificandi (1486) and to his “Ode to Apollo” occurs rather surprisingly in a short piece of fiction, “Duke Carl of Rosenmold”, published in 1887 by the English classics don, writer, and critic Walter Pater. This essay explores Pater’s “Duke Carl” as a Victorian caricature of Celtis and discusses potential sources for Pater’s late Victorian interest in Celtis, in his friend and collaborator, Albrecht Dürer, and their mutual cult of Apollo, the god of the arts and of light.

The German Renaissance humanist Conrad Celtis (1459–1508) plays a key role in a short piece of fiction, “Duke Carl of Rosenmold”, which first appeared in Macmillan’s Magazine in May 1887. The author was Walter Pater (1839–94), a classics don at Brasenose College, Oxford. By 1887 he was best known for his controversial first book, Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873) which through a series of biographical essays on Italian and French renaissance figures (Pico della Mirandola, Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Ronsard) had brought the renaissance into the context of French and English aestheticism, advocating an art for art’s sake approach to art and literature which would prove highly innovative for English criticism. Representing the renaissance as a state of mind, covering some five hundred years, rather than a clearly demarcated historical period, Pater challenged conventional historical periodization. His volume became Oscar Wilde’s “golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty”, which he carried with him always, even in Reading Gaol. In Oxford, the word “renaissance” became inseparably associated with Pater’s name and aesthetic philosophy to such an extent that the renaissance courses offered in the History Faculty deliberately avoided the use of the term and defined themselves on the basis of dates instead, with special subjects such as “Italy 1492–1513”.

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1 Pater 1887.
2 Wilde, 1908, 13:539. For Wilde’s reading of Pater in prison, see Wright 2008, 243, 319.
In “Duke Carl of Rosenmold”, Pater dealt with the concept of the renaissance in a new way, and the figure of Celtis enabled him to bridge the ancient world with fifteenth- and eighteenth-century Germany. The text was one of Pater’s so-called “imaginary portraits”, short pieces of fiction which blended essay with life-writing, short story, and travelogue and explored the lives of fictitious European individuals in a variety of historical settings ranging from medieval France, renaissance Italy, and Tanzania to nineteenth-century England. Celtis’s “Ode to Apollo”, which concludes his *Ars Versificandi* (1486), constitutes a pivotal text in Pater’s narrative of the eighteenth-century German Duke Carl, desiring to bring the God of Light and Poetry to Germany in order to enlighten northern darkness. Pater’s portrait is set in a fairy-tale dukedom with the suggestive name of “Rosenmold”: the young Duke, white and pink like a Dresden figurine, is the only flowering rose in a decadent aristocratic realm where everything has ground to a halt. As in Grimm’s fairy-tale of the “Sleeping Beauty”, all human activity has been arrested as by a magic wand, and with the exception of the Duke, the inhabitants have become as mouldy as the architecture. Time is ripe for a renaissance or a proto-enlightenment, and the ambitious young aristocrat takes it upon himself to bring about this revival. One day Carl goes exploring in the family castle, and the treasure he discovers is none other than Celtis’s slim volume:

> It was in a delightful rummaging of one of those lumber-rooms, escaped from that candle-light into the broad day of the upper-most windows, that the young Duke Carl laid his hand on an old volume of the year 1486, printed in heavy type, with frontispiece, perhaps, by Albert Dürer – *Ars Versificandi: The Art of Versification* by Conrad Celtis. Crowned poet of the Emperor Frederick the Third, he had the right to speak on that subject; for while he vindicated as best he might old German literature against the charge of barbarism, he did also a man’s part towards reviving in the Fatherland the knowledge of the poetry of Greece and Rome; and for Carl, the pearl, the golden nugget, of the volume was the Sapphic ode with which it closed – *To Apollo, praying that he would come to us from Italy, bringing his lyre with him: Ad Apollinem, ut ab Italis cum lyra ad Germanos veniat*. The god of light,

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4 All Pater’s eight imaginary portraits appeared first in periodical form, primarily in *Macmillan’s Magazine*. Four of them were collected in the volume *Imaginary Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1887), “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” among them. See Pater 2019.

coming to Germany from some more favoured world beyond it, over leagues of rainy hill and mountain, making soft day there: that had ever been the dream of the ghost-ridden yet deep-feeling and certainly meek German soul; of the great Dürer, for instance, who had been the friend of this Conrad Celtes, and himself, all German as he was, like a gleam of real day amid that hyperborean German darkness – a darkness which clave to him, too, at that dim time, when there were violent robbers, nay, real live devils, in every German wood. And it was precisely the aspiration of Carl himself. Those verses, coming to the boy’s hand at the right moment, brought a beam of effectual day-light to a whole magazine of observation, fancy, desire, stored up from the first impressions of childhood. To bring Apollo with his lyre to Germany! It was precisely what he, Carl, desired to do – was, as he might flatter himself, actually doing.6

The passage raises a number of questions, not all of which will be answered here, the central one being the extent of Pater’s knowledge of Celtis, of his collaboration with Dürer, and their mutual cult of Apollo. The sun god runs as a Leitmotif throughout Pater’s text in illustration of Carl’s obsession with the arts, with antiquity, with light and enlightenment, and with reversing north and south with allusions to Apollo’s time spent with the Hyperboreans.7 Pater’s nineteenth-century narrator places the protagonist in relief against Apollo worshippers of Carl’s past, present, and future: Celtis and Dürer, Louis XIV – the Roi Soleil – and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The ideal of the Apollo Belvedere (fig. 1) sits as the ghostly form behind the three images which lie submerged in Pater’s text: Dürer’s Apollo (1501–4) (fig. 2), Louis XIV dressed up as Apollo in the Ballet de la nuit (1653) (fig. 3), and Wilhelm von Kaulbach’s image of the Young Goethe skating in Frankfurt (1862) (fig. 4), based on a passage in Book XVI of Goethe’s Dichtung und Wahrheit which concludes Pater’s narrative. Although it is difficult to produce concrete evidence that Pater had read much else by Celtis than his “Ode to Apollo”, I suggest that Celtis’s Apollo cult, his European project of bringing a southern renaissance to the north, and establishing Germany as a new Rome or Florence served as a profound inspiration for Pater’s caricatured figure of

6 Pater 2019, 117.
7 Hyperborean means literally ‘northern’, i.e. beyond Boreas, the North wind in Greek mythology. Hesiod, Homer, Herodotus, Pausanias, Pindar and Plutarch all wrote about the Hyperboreans, a mythical northern people, living in a paradisial world of eternal happiness in a country where the sun never set. Apollo was supposed to spend his winters there, but there was much uncertainty as to the exact location of Hyperborea: Northern Greece, Northern Asia, France, Germany, Britain, Scandinavia were all potential locations. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Germans and Scandinavians frequently identified with the Hyperboreans in their flirtation with Mediterranean culture as antiquaries and archaeologists.
Duke Carl who, although desiring to move south and conquer Italy and Greece, only arrives in Strasbourg before he decides to turn his back on Europe and return to Germany in a fit of patriotic longing for the Vaterland. As a text published only some 15 years after the Franco-Prussian War, “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” deals with Franco-Prussian relations with a vengeance, as the Francophile Carl, imitating Louis XIV in his fashion and architecture, ends his brief life slaughtered by French soldiers in the Seven Years’ War (1756–63).

Crowned Poet Laureate by Frederick III in Nürnberg in 1487, when he was only 28 years old, as the third in line from Petrarch and Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Celtis explored and cultivated a myth of himself as specially singled out by the Leader of the Muses. In his first book of elegies, he described his own birth as an event presided over by Apollo:

Candidus inf lex a phoebus tunc stabat in urna,
Proxima cui nitidae stella serena lyrae,
Cumque sagittiferi surgebant sydera signi
Horaeque post medium tercia noctis erat
Tunc mea me genitrix reserata effudit ab alvo
Et dederat vitae stamina prima meae
Illa nocte lyram nemo conspexit olimpo
Phoebus enim roseis hanc sibi iunxit equis
Plectraque pulsabat toto resonantia coelo
Et dixit: phoebio nascere quisquis eris
Ipse meam citharam plectro gestabis eburno
Lesboaque canes carmina blanda cheli,
Seu te germano contingat cardine nasci
Sive Italo, Gallo, Sarmaticove polo
Nam mea sunt toti communia numina mundo
Sim licet arctois languidior radiis.

Radiant Phoebus [Apollo] stood in the curved Urn [Aquarius], next to him the bright star of the brilliant Lyre, and when the constellation of the Archer was rising, it was three o’clock after midnight. It was then that my mother sent me forth from her opening womb, giving me my life’s thread. That night no-one could see the Lyre in the heavens, since Phoebus bound it to his rose-colored horses. Then he plucked the strings, making the whole sky resound, and said: “Be born for Phoebus, whoever you will be! You will take with yourself my lyre with the ivory plectrum, and you will sing charming songs in the style of the lyre of Lesbos, no matter where you are born, under a German sky, or under

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8 For the Poet Laureateship, see Flood 2006, 303–311 on Celtis.
Surely anyone born under such auspicious circumstances was bound to possess quite extraordinary qualities. As Katharina N. Piechocki phrases it, “The event of Celtis’s birth, moreover, deprives not only Greece, but the heavens themselves of ‘the brilliant Lyre,’ now deposited, in a movement of *translatio artium*, in Germany. Through his own birth, Celtis’s poetic voice triumphantly and self-confidently proclaims, Germany is transformed from a Nordic site of death and darkness into a creative fulcrum productive of a hitherto unknown but now illuminated artistic bounty.”

Celtis was not exactly modest in his personal creation myth; even if Apollo’s rays were weaker in the North, the deity had provided his German protégé with just the right powers to compose his Sapphic “Ode to Apollo” which concluded his *Ars Versificandi*:

**AD PHOEBUM, UT GERMANIAM PETAT**

Phoebe, qui blandae citharae repertor, 
linque delectos Helicona, Pindum et, 
ae veni in nostras vocitatus oras 
carmine grato.

Certis, ut laetae properent Camenae, 
et canant dulces gelido sub axe; 
tu veni incultam fidibus canoris 
visere terram.

Barbarus quem olim genuit vel acer 
vel parens hirtus, Latii leporis 
nescius, nunc sit duce te docendus 
dicere carmen,

Orpheus quails cencinit Pelasgis, 
quem ferae atroces agilesque cervi 
arboresque altae nemorum securae 
plectra moventem.

Tu celer vastum poteras per aequor 
laetus a Graecis Latium videre, 
invehens Musas, voluiisti gratas 
pandere et artes.

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9 Quoted from Piechocki 2019, 39–40.
10 Ibid., 41.
Sic velis nostras rogitamus oras
Italas ceu quondam aditare terras,
barbarus sermo fugiatque, ut atrum
subruat omne.\textsuperscript{11}

Phoebus, who the sweet-noted lyre constructed,
Leave fair Helicon and depart your Pindus,
And by pleasant song designated, hasten
To these our borders.

You perceive how joyous the Muses gather,
Sweetly singing under a frozen heaven;
Come yourself, and with your melodious harp-strings,
Gaze on these wastelands.

So must he, whom sometime a rude or rustic
Parent fostered, barbarous, all unknowing
Latium’s splendors, choose you now as his teacher
At writing verses.

Just as Orpheus sang to the old Pelasgians,
Orpheus, whom swift stags, beasts of savage custom,
Whom the lofty trees of the forest followed,
Charmed by his plectrum.

Swift and joyous, once you forswore, and gladly,
Greece for Latium, passing the mighty ocean;
There you wished your delectable arts to broadcast,
Leading the Muses.

Thus it is our prayer you may wish to visit
Our abode, as once those Italian reaches.
May wild tongue take flight, and may all of darkness
Come to destruction.\textsuperscript{12}

Writing from what he describes as the “wastelands”, Celtis prays for the destruction of northern darkness, a darkness which Pater repeatedly evokes in the passage quoted above. Pater’s text mixes elements from Gothic fiction with ideas of the enlightenment as a renaissance revival. The text begins in utter darkness on a macabre note, when the mortal remains of Carl and his betrothed are found in the soil and have to be identified by nineteenth-century

\textsuperscript{11} The text follows Celtis’ \textit{Libri odarum} 4.5 as rendered by Schäfer in Celtis 2008.
\textsuperscript{12} English translation from Spitz 1957, 10.
German bone science. It progresses retrospectively through an account of the young Carl’s ambitions to transform life at the Rosenmold Court into a flourishing cultural centre, in imitation of life at the court of the French Sun King. Celtis’s “Ode to Apollo” serves as the poetic manifesto for Carl’s grandiose project, but he dies before any of it comes to fruition. Carl has merely been a precursor of an international enlightenment; the figure who rises triumphant at the end of Pater’s narrative is the young Goethe, skating across the Main, a luminous figure, the reincarnation of Apollo, heading for the modern world.

Celtis was not exactly a household name to Victorian readers; when one trawls through the Proquest full-text database of Victorian periodicals,\footnote{https://about.proquest.com/products-services/british_periodicals.html (accessed on 17 March 2021).} which often provides useful clues to topics raised in Pater’s writings, one discovers very few references to the German poet. Editions of and critical writings on Celtis are mainly a twentieth-century phenomenon, and when trying to map his place in late Victorian England we only catch sporadic glimpses of him. He makes a brief appearance in August von Eye’s \textit{Leben und Wirken Albrecht Dürers} (1860) where Dürer’s friendship with Celtis and his elaborate illustrations for the \textit{Quatuor Libri Amorum} (1502) was discussed. The 1869 edition was in Oxford’s Bodleian Library, and Pater may have been familiar with it.\footnote{Eye 1869.} In Richard Ford Heath’s slim volume on Albrecht Dürer (1881) we learn that

He furnished drawings for Celtis’s books – the \textit{Philosophy, Apollo with Daphne}, and \textit{Apollo in Parnassus}; also one of \textit{Celtes before the Emperor Maximillian}. Some were not, however, to the taste of his employers, and were unnoticed. For instance, the beautiful etching of \textit{Apollo} in the British Museum, and that remarkable drawing in Windsor Castle, bearing the inscription “Pupilla Augusta”, with the view of Nürnberg in the background, which was probably intended for the title page of Celtis’s description of the city.\footnote{Heath, 1881, 29–30.} Heath was an Oxford man, residing in Hertford College, and Pater may have discussed Dürer and Celtis with him. They share a speculative style about the extent of the collaboration between poet and painter; Pater’s suggestion that Dürer produced a graphic title page for the \textit{Ars Versificandi} belongs to the realm of myth. The copies I have been able to consult (admittedly only of the 1494 edition) are without illustrative graphic work, and by 1486 Dürer would have been a very young man of fifteen. The most recent research suggests that
the friendship between the two began only in 1496. The British Isles hold only two copies of the *Ars Versificandi*, and I wonder whether Pater ever laid hands on a physical copy of the book. Aware of the typefont, of the position of the “Ode to Apollo” as the concluding text in Celtis’s volume, and familiar with the content of the Ode, Pater treats the book as one he knew well. At the moment, the trail ends here; primary material about Pater is minimal: no notebooks or diaries, and only a slim volume of not very informative letters. The Oxford libraries, which Pater consulted, have limited holdings of Celtis’s works and there is no evidence that Pater borrowed any of them. His own experience of Germany went back to the late 1850s and early 1860s when, together with his sisters Hester and Clara, Walter Pater made lengthy visits to their aunt who resided in Heidelberg and Dresden. Pater’s fictitious realm of Rosenmold merges aspects of the two German cities, but whether his early German travels also provided him with an early encounter with Celtis must remain in the realm of speculation.

I would suggest that for the Victorians, Dürer served as a way into Celtis. Among the artists in the Pre-Raphaelite circle there was a keen interest in German woodcuts and incunables. John Ruskin (1819–1900) repeatedly praised Dürer as the greatest of German artists (without mentioning Celtis), William Morris (1834–96), founder of the Kelmscott Press, had an impressive private collection of German incunables, now at the Pierpont Morgan Library. Morris’s and Edward Burne-Jones’s studio assistant, the painter and art dealer Charles Fairfax Murray (1849–1919) had his own copy of Celtis’s *Quatuor Libri Amorum* (1502). In Pater’s circles Celtis was gradually becoming a presence, a representative of the German renaissance, whose figure appeared in prints, and whose writings were, if not actually read, then certainly connected with book illustration and early print culture. On the outskirts of Pater’s social and artistic circles, in touch with such Pater acquaintances as Sidney Colvin and Herbert Horne, was the private collector William Mitchell (1821–1908), whose passion for German woodcuts was reflected in the exhibitions in the Burlington Fine Arts Club, of which he was a founding

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16 Schauerte 2015, convincingly connects a series of Dürer’s graphic works from 1496 to his friendship with Celtis.
18 Thus the authority on Pater’s reading, Inman 1981 and Inman 1990, finds no evidence of him owning or borrowing any texts by or about Celtis. The only other critic who discusses Pater’s use of Celtis is Monsman 1967, 127–129, who provides no additional information on Pater’s reading of Celtis.
19 Anon. 1917, lot. 116.
The exhibitions in 1869 and 1882 focussed on Dürer and his circles,21 displaying in 1882 Hans Burgkmair the Elder’s Celtis epitaph, his so-called “Sterbebild”, executed in 1504 some four years before his death.22 If visiting the exhibition, Pater would have been face to face with Celtis’s extraordinary death portrait (fig. 5): mourned by Apollo and Hermes, the poet rests his hand on his four most important volumes: the Odes, the Epigrams, the Amores and his illustrated History of Germany.23 In 1895 Mitchell donated his German woodcuts to the British Museum adding to its collection of prints relating to Celtis which had been formed largely in the nineteenth century. A modern facsimile of Dürer’s illustration of Celtis presenting his Amores to Emperor Maximillian was given to the Museum in 1870,24 and in 1887, the same year as Pater published his “Duke Carl of Rosenmold”, the Museum acquired its copy of Dürer’s Philosophia (fig. 6),25 the frontispiece to Celtis’s Quatuor Libri Amorum secundum Quatuor Latera Germanie, a book which, apart from Celtis’s love elegies in the manner of Propertius and Tibullus, also contained a treatise on Germany (Germania generalis). In 1904 Mitchell gave his own copy of the book to the Museum.26

With its allegorical representation of Lady Philosophy, presiding over the Seven Liberal Arts, surrounded by roundels depicting Plato, Ptolomy, Cicero, Virgil, and Albertus Magnus in a composition where the Western, Southern, Northern, and Eastern winds blow from each their corner, Dürer’s image introduces Celtis’s complex work, described by Piechocki as an extraordinary piece of cartographic humanism which defines a new Europe, challenging conventional notions of the roles played by northern and southern Europe in the development of humanism. Highlighting the “movement of the translatio artium from Italy to Germany”, Celtis fashioned “Germany as the very site where the arts originate. By stressing recent groundbreaking scientific and artistic achievements like the printing press,” Celtis “framed Germany as the hub of technological innovation and Italy as its beneficiary”.27 As Susanne de Beer points out, Celtis connected the German to the Italian Renaissance through relocation, contestation, and imitation, presenting “the German revival of literature not so much as an alternative, but rather as a successor to the Italian Renaissance.”28 In legitimising a migration of the Renaissance

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21 Anon 1869; Anon 1882.
22 Anon 1882, no. 70 and 96.
24 BM 1870,0813.314.
25 BM 1887,1010.16.
26 BM 1904,0206.4
27 Piechocki 2019, 41.
28 de Beer 2020, 19.
northwards, Celtis claimed superiority for the Germans as an indigenous and authentic people, thus using “the exact same arguments once made by Tacitus to prove the Germans’ barbarism: namely, that they are untainted ‘noble savages’, the product of their peculiarly harsh climate.” Turning the traditional contrast between Roman virtue and German vice on its head, Celtis made Germany “both the diametrical opposite of Italy, which he portrays as a den of immorality, and the antithesis of how it is perceived by the Italians: as a barbarous country.”

In Pater’s layered narrative, Carl’s quest for the South results in his discovery of the strength of his own patriotism. From having had the grandest of cosmopolitan ambitions, he ends up turning his back on Europe, as his life takes its course from ideals of the large world to the reality of the small world and directly into the grave. He becomes an eighteenth-century caricature of Celtis, caught between Celtis and Dürer as the renaissance luminaries and the poetic genius of Goethe. Incapable of embracing the wider European question of Germany’s place within Europe, he makes his dreamlike realm of Rosenmold an escapist fantasy with a modern referent. The Bavarian Ludwig II, popularly known as the “fairy-tale King”, had died only in the summer of 1886, and the English periodicals had written lengthy accounts of his castles and his mysterious death in the Starnberger See. One of the astutest of Pater’s reviewers, Oscar Wilde, immediately detected the contemporary reference: “Duke Carl is not unlike the late King of Bavaria, in his love of France, his admiration for the Grand Monarque, and his fantastic desire to amaze and to bewilder, but the resemblance is possibly only a chance one.” When thinking about the renaissance as a recurrent phenomenon, Pater’s text provides us with an intricate set of layerings, as nineteenth-century Oxford writes of nineteenth-century Germany through an imaginary enlightenment Duke’s discovery of a fifteenth-century Poet Laureate’s desire to bring the ancient God of light and poetry to the north to bring about a second renaissance. Should we think of “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” as a centenary text, celebrating the four hundred years since Celtis’s coronation as Poet Laureate? In spite of relatively feeble evidence, I rather suspect that Pater knew more of Celtis than has hitherto been supposed, and the “Ode to Apollo”, Carl’s “golden nugget” was only the beginning.

29 Ibid., 27.
30 Ibid., 27.
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Illustrations

Fig. 1
Anon, *Apollo Belvedere*, Roman copy after a Greek original of the fifth century BC, 224 cm, marble Rome, Musei Vaticani
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0_Apollon_du_Belvédère_-_Cortile_Ottagono_-_Museo_Pio-Clementino_-_Vatican_(1).JPG
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Photographer Jean-Pol Grandmont
Fig. 2
Albrecht Dürer, *Apollo* (1501–4), 28.3 x 20.5 cm, pen on paper, London, British Museum BM SL,5218.183
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_SL-5218-183 - Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 © The Trustees of the British Museum.
Fig. 3
Henri Gissey, *Louis XIV as Apollo in Le Ballet Royal de la Nuit* (1653), pen, wash and gouache, 16.7 x 26 cm, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ballet_de_la_nuit_1653.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ballet_de_la_nuit_1653.jpg) - Wikimedia public domain
Fig. 4
Fig. 5
Hans Burgkmair the Elder, Epitaph of Conrad Celtis (1504), 29.4 x 20.7 cm, print (woodcut), London, British Museum BM 1895,0122.391
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1895-0122-391 – Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0 © The Trustees of the British Museum.
Fig. 6
Albrecht Dürer, *Philosophia*, frontispiece to Celtis’s *Quatuor Libri Amorum secundum Quatuor Latera Germanie* (1502), 21.5 x 14.8 cm, print (woodcut), London, British Museum BM 1887,1010.16
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